

# THE INFLATABLE ANGEL

*Zaza Burchuladze*

## ● *The Night Séance*

There are fewer people believing in ghost raising, even when they busy themselves with spirit rapping. The Goroziyas did not believe that they would get in touch with the soul of Giorgi Gurjiev. Souls are like Hollywood stars. It's absolutely impossible to make contact with them.

Nino and Niko Gorozia had no expectation of success right up to the end. And still they had blacked out the kitchen. There was a large square of Whatman paper lying on the table. Someone had drawn a wide circle and written Georgian letters with a felt pen studiously. "YES" and "NO" were the words written beneath the circle. There was a saucer lying upside down with an arrow painted on it with a felt pen too. A short and bold candle was burning on the saucer studded with scarlet dots. The coral red light passed only to the Whatman paper, saucer with the painted arrow, their hands rested on the table and the faces of the Goroziyas.

Neither the clock telling that the first hour had already begun, nor the kitchen sink full of dirty dishes could be seen in the darkness. The candle-light did not reach the corner. There was a carcass of a dead fly floating in the café con leche left in a mug with the Nesquik rabbit portrayed on it. The room was stuffy – it was a mixture of nicotine, dishwashing gel and a dog's stench smelling together. Fuko, a pink-muzzled bull terrier napped in a chair standing at the wall. Neighbor's TV could be heard in the kitchen. Someone was watching "Profile" with Maia Asatiani hosting another joker. The laughing audience applauded with zeal.

Nino always looked younger than she really was. Yes, she was a small fry at Tbilisi City Hall, but even there one can find women looking young for their age. The slightly withered bosom along with the large blue eyes, the nice figure and the absence of cellulite evidenced her youthful looks. Who would have thought that an iron will was lying hidden behind her continent appearance and melancholic eyes.

Niko was not a giant himself. Nevertheless, in contrast to Nino, there was something unbearable and politically incorrect in his size. The chubby cheeks, round lips and the passionless eyes made him look like a depressed psychopath. But his nature was so gentle that one could knead him like a dough.

Nino had thrust her feet into rubber flippers. She was dressed in jean shorts and a white, almost transparent shirt. She had just come out of the bathroom and had not dried the short, disordered hair thoroughly. The shampoo flavor was slightly brightening up the close air in the room. She was not wearing a bra and the tight nipples were bugling the shirt. Slightly aroused, she just wanted Niko to sneak his hand under the shirt and touch her tit...

But Niko was looking down at the saucer with the arrow, thinking about the éclair in the refrigerator that he could not touch. He had been refraining from eating after 6 p.m. for a week. It was racking. The diet was a fixed idea, rather than a necessity, for he really had no problem with the overweight.

The idea to arrange the séance popped into her head that day, while she was rummaging the Internet. Niko had nothing against the idea. It is not easy for one to disagree with his wife, especially as she's eager to get in contact with the deceased. He just asked:

"Why Gurjiev?" Then he added to himself: "No, say... say..." He wanted to raise a more authoritative deadman, though he failed to remember any but the parrot that he had when he was a boy. One morning, when he took the cloth off the cage, there was a dead bird lying on the bottom. It was still warm. When he took the tiny body, the bird's head drooped aside...

"Because", Nino paused, "Because, we'll talk to him in Georgian at least".

The whole point is that the Goroziyas knew no foreign language pretty well. If she found herself in a tight corner, Nino would manage to say something in German. Niko was even worse in English. But why on earth had they to make such an effort? Nino was less informed about Gurjiev. She knew that he was not Georgian, though she thought he was born in Georgia.

Niko had some doubts about any language barrier with souls, but in his heart of hearts he still agreed with his wife. There was something motherly in their marital relations.

Some time he was considered to be a promising director. He was twenty, when all of a sudden the attention of the exact jet set was focused on him due to his student shorts. Many spoke about his intuition and quick eye. It seemed that everything was ahead of him: momentary love affairs with desperate housewives, a scarf round his neck and a half-wide way of life... before he met Nino, his future wife.

With Nino he suddenly faded and got tender... A still camera substituted for his video camera all of itself. During the last three years he even participated in several collective photography exhibitions, though as it turned out, the penetrating eye had already become dull. There were people able to take pictures of black and white portraits and landscapes and they did it much better than he used to do. He saw that, but he did not feel it keenly. That's why his still camera was more often left on a shelf by the side of his CDs and books. As for his intuition, now he could just divine what would upset Nino, especially as he had been kept by her for quite long. Sometimes, when they were together, Niko used to say the things, he thought he was expected to say for the moment.

"Who knows!" thought Niko that night. He tried to shake the dead parrot out of his head and said:

"Let it be Gurjiev", he shrugged his shoulders and added for some reason: "We'll see".

### ● *The Dancing Master*

Nino did not expect that such a success was in store for them, even when she passed the inverted plate over candle flare and put it down on the cardboard. The Eyjafjallajökull Volcano in Iceland was just going to erupt, when in Tbilisi the Goroziyas gently touched the saucer with their fingers and closed their eyes. "Gurjiev, come to us!.. Gurjiev, come !..", Nino whispered more mechanically than fervently.

The plate wavered first. Then it got stuck against the cardboard. When they heard some crackling noise from the hallway, Nino fell silent at once. The Goroziyas goggled at each other. Fuko jumped up and prinked up his ears. There was a rustling in the hallway again. Fuko leapt of the chair. The dog, all focused upon the rustle, moved towards the hall, growling. The pace of his short, brawny legs reminded one of a big lizard moving its extremities aside. Nino Niko's hand in her palm. Fuko stepped into the hallway.

Someone hacked there distinctly. All of a sudden Fuko stopped growling. Sounds of fuss could be heard from the darkness. Nino squeezed Niko's hand more strongly. The latter failed to think of anything else and whispered to the dog in the darkness:

"Fuko!" Then he called a bit louder: "Fuko!"

"It's here", was the answer from the hall.

Nino's eyes bugged out and the hair on her back stood on end. She was a Georgian woman and obviously had some hair along her spinal column.

"Who's there?" asked Niko. He was whispering for some reason.

An awkward old man of medium height appeared from the darkness. There was something about him that could remind one of a seal. Even in the light of the candle it could be seen well that the man was a bit sightless. He had large highbeams and a gerontic fold of fat under his chin. His white and thick moustache with the ends turned up seemed to be growing right from the nostrils. He had

unbuttoned his black, shrunk jacket. A chain of his gold watch was hanging between the pocket of the black, satin vest and a button. He wore a pair of flat and dusty lace-up shoes. He had put on a black, Karakul papaka of a strange shape, a mixture of a Sufi taji hat and a pioneer headgear. Fuko was by his side, shaking its tail.

"It's me", said the man from afar. "Gurjiev".

Finally he slewed round his tongue so as Nino failed to make it out what he said, Gurjiev or Dorziev. Niko stood up at the sight of the old man.

"Please come in", said Niko, "Mister"...

"Call me Guru", the old man helped him. Gurjiev's style of speech was strange a bit, as if he was hardly suppressing the smile.

"Guru", repeated Niko.

"Well", the old man held out his hand to Niko, "I like the name Ryomond too".

Fuko barked deafly. It was like coughing, asking for their attention.

"Rymond", asked Niko and dolefully shook hands with the guest.

Fuko stood up on the hind legs, resting against the old man with his paws. The man, who nearly fell, patted Fuko on the head and rubbed the dog's ear.

"Let it be Guru", said the man with a smile, "but without that Mister!"

Niko could not make it out whether the guest was joking or not.

"Salaam-alaikum!" The old man shook hands with Nino. "A dancing master, Giorgi Gurjiev. For you just Guru".

Gurjiev looked into Nino's eyes for a second. She instantly felt a slight tingling between her legs and a shiver went up her body. It was somewhat of a hypnotism, pleasing and terrifying at a time.

"Nino". Notwithstanding her being embarrassed, she felt that the guest's palm was warm and pudgy.

Before the old man took his hand away, Nino noticed that he had a silver ring on his long finger. There were some birds imprinted on the jeweler's work. Each detail could be singled out even in the wan light of the candle like the details of an obverse of a newly cast coin. There were a little man with a bird head, a double-headed eagle, a stork standing on one of its legs and an ordinary rooster imprinted on the silver circle one after another...Only one bird imprint was repeated three time - three birds like three dots one after another. The bird had a large body, a small head and a sickle bill.

The guest caught the direction of Nino's gaze.

"It's an Andean condor", said the guest and nodded to Nino hurriedly. "This is an honor!"

Niko noticed that the guest grinned at the sight of the saucer with the arrow painted on it. He also noticed that the old man spoke Georgian with a nice accent. He talked in a quiet manner. Niko realized that Nino was right about Gurjiev's soul to be raised up.

"Would you like some tea?", Nino stood up from the chair.

"We have some éclairs", thought Niko.

"There's no time", the guest took the watch out of the pocket and looked down at it, "I'm so sorry. I have to be somewhere else right now... I don't know how I happened to be here". The guest turned his lower lip out. "Something has been mixed up, I guess".

There was an awkward silence in the kitchen. Niko turned away from the old man. He looked at Nino first, then at Fuko and the refrigerator. Finally he stared at Nino again.

"I'll disappear now", said the guest in a businesslike manner. He began to count: "five...four...", the Gorozi fixed their eyes on the old man. "Three...two...one"

True, Gurjiev was spectacular in his counting and even flinched like a TV picture with glares, but he did not disappear. Something just crackled in his paunch and threw a black soot out of his ears along with the burnt rubber smell.

Fuko was astonished. The dog barked indistinctly. It was like coughing. The guest looked at the watch, shook it in the air, put against his ear and looked at it again.

"What's up?" asked Nino.

"Don't know", the guest belched involuntarily and disgorged the rest of the soot from his mouth like a smoke. The burnt rubber could be smelled again

The awkward hush fell over the kitchen again. The guest seemed to be perplexed.

"Can I help you?" Niko moved a chair to the man, "Please sit down".

"I don't, dear, I don't think..." The old man sat down automatically.

"The main thing is not to panic". The guest seemed to have been talking more with his own self than with the Goroziyas. "Let's talk and ... we'll see when I disappear".

## ● *Keen on Mushrooms*

A cone tripped Gurjiev in the forest of Mtatsminda. He failed to control himself and made several somersaults on the earth like a circus bear...He happened to strike his head against a moss-grown stone with such a force that everything went dark before his eyes instantly and his ears stuffed up. He almost swooned. Gurjiev did not feel that some splinters of glass had cut his knee. He sat on the splashy ground covered with leaves and needles of a conifer. He was stunned. There were an egg shell and a wine bottle smashed into smithereens nearby. A rumpled, shabby etiquette of "Kindzmarauli" was still stuck against the shards.

Gurjiev could not notice that in front of him, under a fir-tree a mushroom with a red cap had thrust out of the leaves. If he had seen the mushroom, he would necessarily have recognized young Griboedov with the round glasses on his nose, a rainbow in his eyes and a red polka-dot hat with those white dots on it. The story goes that the soul of Aleksander Griboedov still roams about Mtatsminda forest, often getting into mushrooms. It's easily understandable. The diplomat killed in Teheran in 1829 was interred just in the vicinity, in Mtatsminda Pantheon. The metempsychosis of Griboedov's soul getting into mushrooms is an usual thing. Where on earth can inhabit one who's keen on mushroom other than in a mushroom? And the rainbow was in his eyes just because there are some beings living like parasites obtaining nourishment from others, in whom they live. Like Gurjiev, Griboedov had quite enigmatic eyes too. When one has spent a century in a mushroom eating the same mushroom his gaze will turn into something enigmatic and no matter whether he likes it or not.

Griboedov could not see Gurjiev too. It's too difficult to see something before you, when there's a rainbow jammed into your eyes, especially when the rainbow revolves like a hypnotic spiral. Standing under a fir and smiling cunningly, he was smoking his small hook . Griboedov breathed out a sweetish, violet smoke out of his regular lips towards Gurjiev, making the latter more and more stupefied. The two, Griboedov and Gurjiev had something in common besides their enigmatic looks. It was neither the fact that they both were interred far away from their motherlands, nor the stereotypes resulting from the world wide net that made everyone and everything just equal. The great warriors resembled each other in something different.

Besides the smoke, the air was full of the heady reek of dampness, onions and humus. Gurjiev found it out that the scratch was bleeding, when Fuko started to lick his knee. He laughed – he was a boy, when he got his knee slightly scratched, and a dog licked the blood coming out of the wound then.

Filo was the name of the Caucasian shepherd. When he got three years old, his dad brought him a black and fatty ball with a small, wet muzzle and paws that were still rose-colored. It had a milky breath.

Gurjiev looked at Fuko, realizing that he knew almost nothing about the dog reminding him of a big, white rat. He knew nothing about the owners of the dog and about the city the fragments of which could be seen between the trees - Mtatsminda and a part of Sololaki districts.

A giant, zinc woman in the ruins of Narikala Fortress, carrying a bowl in one hand and a sword in another, had leaned forward a bit as if it was going to crumble over the city.... Satellite antennas were installed on the roofs of the old, redbrick houses.

Hawkers used to ride donkeys with saddle-bags along the narrow streets. Matsoni, lavashi, whine and persimmons were sold everywhere. Tbilisi was called Tiflis then. It was full of low-browed Georgians, Tatars with gold teeth, Armenians with their single, fused brows, red-haired Circassians, and Persians with red nails... It was worth peering at the women in motley sundresses coming out of the sulfuric baths. The pleasant memories faded as soon as he remembered the old women from Tbilisi. Someone said that there could be no one worse than Georgian old women, for they were

witches. But nationality has nothing in common with the thing. Caucasian old women are generally of the kind – horns, and heels and tails, that's what's inherited by them. And the besoms...well, they get their besoms according to their deserts.

Gurjiev looked over Tbilisi and realized that he did not know what he was doing in the city, in the forest, by the side of the white dog now licking his knee with diligence. As a true philosopher, he finally thought that he knew nothing about his own self. Yes, wit works woe.

Sentiments rushed into the mind of Gurjiev sitting on the ground. He remembered a hot day in summer when his mother sent him to the bazaar to buy some meat. "Buy a bony piece". The woman took some money from the tucks of her dress, "a kilogram". Gurjiev had thick eyebrows, a moustache-fuzz and a chin advanced forward. They had shaved his hair off the egg-shaped head because of fleas.

The "recollection" was definitely a trick played by his old age mind. However, the "recollections" of the hike to the bazaar were so detailed, that Gurjiev had no doubts that everything might have been just a slapdash fabrication of his own brains. It's hard to say whether it was a memory deception, a variety of paramnesia, or it was red-hooded Griboedov standing under the fir-tree and involuntarily inspiring him to think of the things.

One thing was obvious, Gurjiev besotted and filling giddy had no doubts when "recalling" that sometime he walked through the country roads together with Filo to Shiraki Bazaar. He was carrying a small basket with a clean cloth to wrap the meat in it. Filo led him proudly, leaving him behind and disappearing for a while. From time to time a hot wind brought a stench with it: something had been becoming rotten. He had never gone so far without his father before. Lying in bed, the bitten and feverish man needed some meat broth.

Last day his mom rushed out of the house. She came back with puny Sirush carrying a leather pack. She had a wax face with a long nose and a hairy birthmark on the puckered face. In the black dress faded into green, she looked fright. Gurjiev who had climbed up a pomegranate, was observing through a window how Sirush wound a napkin round a spoon and put it into his dad's mouth... The latter squeezed the spoon with his jaws strongly. Then the puny cut some flesh circle out of his father's leg. She sucked the blood with effort for a long time, splitting it into a bowl carried by his mother. Finally, when the bleeding lessened, she put some ointment into the wound with her forefinger and put a cloth round the wound. When leaving she charged the family with the following: "In a medical book it's written: and if one bit by a viper feels weak and feeble and is in low spirits, he must be fed with meat cooked in boiling water". His mother told Gurkiev only that evening that a snake had bitten his father.

### ● *The False Mirror Land*

It was unbearably hot that day. At the bazaar entrance, in the sun there was only one beggar standing at the stone wall. Instead of his legs there was a small wooden board. A rusty bowl with some small change in it was standing in front of him. He had some rags wound round his waist burnt with sun. He looked more like a stone statue than a living being. One might not have noticed the skinny man covered with dust from head to board. He had simply flown into the wall.

There were almost no buyers in the bazaar. A seller of prunes slept open-eyed on a jogging chair. In a sack lying in front of him there were blue-violet prunes looking like semiprecious stones in their dust-white coating. Over a prop standing nearby there were some dry fruit stands hanging like beads.

An old shoe-maker had put an apron on his naked body. With his lips compressed together he was holding some nails to nail a heel down to a high boot. The smell of glue and leather was coming out of his small, kennel-like box.

The quivering sounds of duduk were heard, but the player playing a simple and sad melody was not seen. It was a story of a might-have-been.

On a cloth spread right on the ground a junkman had put an old wooden comb, a music box, an ordinary woman bracelet, eastern slippers with upward curving toes, a small, ivory tobacco pipe that had turned yellowed, and what not...

A large mirror in a wooden frame was leaned against a pillar. It was a rare thing – somewhat of an inlay mosaiced with segments of distorted and warped mirrors.

A ruffled hen dazed by the heat was sitting in the shadow of the unusual looking glass. There were some reddish motley feathers lying in the dust before the bird. The gentle breeze was just swinging the feathers.

Only a few steps away from the scene, flies were flying over the meat chunks scattered on a counter. The stink brought by the light wind was even more pungent.

A green fly the size of a small green frog sat motionless on a black and Persian violet snout of a cow head put at the edge of a counter. The head looked at Gurjiev more curiously than the stout butcher sitting on a chair with his narrow and perfidious eyes half-closed. He was either sweltered, or drunk. Maybe he was sweltered and drunken at the same time. He could remind one of a lazy wild animal waiting for its victim motionless for a long time.

"I want a bony piece", said Gurjiev to the butcher, "to cook it in boiling water".

The man happened to be slow in standing up. He swung his hairy hand against the flies attacking the meat. His whitish grey apron was dirty with blood. Blood was clotted even under his fingernails.

"How much?"

"A kilogram".

"A kilogram", repeated the displeased butcher, "for a cat?"

"For my dad". Gurjiev was hurt.

The butcher did not say anything more. He looked round the counter and put a meat chunk on the scales.

At that very moment Gurjiev noticed a man standing behind the shoe-makers box. The man had wide nostrils, fleshy lips and thick hair looking like a papaka hat. It's impossible to become tanned to such an extent. He was absolutely black. On the front of his chokha he had silver cartridge cases put in small tubular holders. A dagger in a silver sheath was hanging on his belt. The man was feeding his snow-white horse with some barley sugar from his palm. The beast seemed to be beaming. Only its snout was grey and whitish pink. The eyes were coal-black. Gurjiev realized that it was the black man people had been talking too much about. Everyone repeated others and talked about a black man who'd come to the town. But no one knew what the man had been doing there and who on earth he was.

The man looked in his direction and saw Gurjiev out of the corner of his eye. Another eye was totally withered and dead.

Gurjiev trembled, for he knew that a withered eye was a sign of death. Besides, he thought that he'd just looked through the sound eye into the man's soul. To be more exact, Gurjiev thought he had failed to look through the eye, for the man was as black and dark as night even on the inside. The man was the very image of someone. The butcher sobered up Gurjiev.

"It's more than a kilogram", said the butcher putting the meat piece into the basket along with a chunk of fat, "take it... for the stock".

The duduk player played a long, shivering note.

Gurjiev covered the meat with the cloth and took the change. He had just turned, when the white horse neighed. Gurjiev looked towards the horse, but sun reflected by the shoe-makers mirror made him strain his eyes. Filo leaped aside awkwardly and clashed against the mirror.

Before the mirror fell over Gurjiev, all the segment reflected a great number of images of the boy, each segment absorbing its own share in Gurjiev like a vacuum cleaner. In the twinkling of an eye Gurjiev saw his twin brothers in the segments. In some segments the boy was long-necked like a giraffe, or round like a ball. In some segments he was crooked like a worm... Gurjiev was frightened. It was like a nightmare. He was afraid to be left in the segments of the looking-glass forever. To be more precise, he dreaded to be left in the false mirror land.

The horse neighed again. The clutter of horse's hoofs was heard immediately. Gurjiev could not make it out whether it was just an optical illusion, or the black man riding the white horse really scudded through the cracks of the mirror. The light wind following the horseman made the air dusty. It seemed that time had stopped. The dust and feathers hovered in the air.

Gurjiev was stunned. He sat on the ground, squinting his eyes, like a doll unable to feel that he had cut his knee. He was surrounded with mirror segments and many-colored feathers. People gathered around him quickly. Suddenly the duduk became silent too. The red hen looked into different directions with its round eyes, flaming and blazing in the sun like embers. Gurjiev asked the bird tacitly, telepathically:

"The Firebird?"

The bird shoveled the dust and mirror segments on the ground with its beak and answered Gurjiev also telepathically:

"The Firebird for one, just a hen for others".

Gurjiev got down right to business:

"Do you know who the black man is?"

"Abkhazian negro. He live in Adziubzha, Kodori Gorge", was the answer.

"Geogrian?" Gurjiev was astonished.

It is hard to say whether the man was a descendant of the Ancient Kolkhi people or an offspring of the Africans bought by the Governor Shervashidze in the eighth century at Istanbul slave market. The Governor took the slaves to Abkhazia to work in lemon plantations.

"How many are they?"

"Several families", explained the hen between the cackling sounds. They are unsociable, neither get in touch with others, nor allow anyone into their circle.

It was more a walking library than a bird. Gurjiev had more questions to be asked, but Filo ran to him frightening the hen. The bird disappeared, leaving a strange egg on the earth. It lightened from the inside and ticked like a clock. Gurjiev found it out that the scratch was bleeding, when the dog started to lick his knee. He grasped the egg, though it turned out to be too hollow and fragile. The egg smashed in his palm immediately.

Gurjiev still sitting in Mtatsminda forest was surrounded with the trees instead of the people. He had an ordinary egg shell in his hand. His gold watch was ticking on the ground. Maybe it had fallen out of his pocket. Fuko, the pink-muzzled bull terrier was still licking his knee. Under a fir-tree the same red-capped mushroom dotted with white had thrust out of the leaves. It was an usual death cup and Griboedov seemed to have never got into it. Souls are like Hollywood stars, never able to stay in one place.

Gurjiev looked at Fuko, realizing that he knew almost nothing about the dog reminding him of a big, white rat. He knew nothing about the owners of the dog and about the remote and buzzy city the fragments of which could be seen between the trees.