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A Small Country

I remember seeing the man sitting at an oak table take two pieces of paper from a drawer and then smile as he spoke to me:

'Here,' he put his finger on the paper on his left, 'is the statement of intent to excommunicate you from the Georgian Orthodox Church. If you don't apologize to the Georgian people and the Church, the Synod will be obliged to make it public, which would set in motion the process of excommunication itself. It says that you deny the living God, as well as the rules of our mother the Church, that you mock the faith and insult the beliefs of Orthodox people, the Saints, and the memory of our ancestors who were canonized. While this one,' he pointed to the paper to his right, says 'the Synod has decided you are a prodigal, absolved by the people and our mother the Church.'

'But only if we have a public apology,' the Archimandrite, sitting in the dark corner of the room, reminded us. 'Otherwise, it's going to be an anathema.'

'Are you serious?', someone sitting behind me asked.

'People are worried...'

Excommunication.

Anathema.

A prodigal.

The man looked at the papers smiled occasionally. I wondered if he had a nervous tic or was just embarrassed by what he had to say.

I was too tired and confused to make a joke or reply politely.

'You have to apologize publicly,' unperturbed, the man said it again with an ironic smile.

Ever since I was born my parents did their best to encourage me, praising me because for twenty-three years *I* really deserved to be praised. And now, suddenly, these strangers were telling them that *I* didn't deserve their praise and, if I refused to behave appropriately, I would become their prodigal or something worse.

People get killed for less nowadays...

That's what told my Dad. And where? Next to the Patriarch's rest room where, ideally, they should have been talking about virtue, at the very least from a sense of decency.

'It's your fault,' the Patriarch later told my Dad, 'you've failed to raise your son properly.'

And all the while, for my parents, even my Dad who was deeply insulted by the Patriarch's words, I truly was a clever, good-natured, genuinely decent, gifted twenty-three year old child – an exceptional son - known to many as a wonder kid, a writer in a small country, only ten years older than Independent Georgia itself, and who by any standard had done nothing that deserved reprimand.

My parents' son wasn't seared by the 1990s: he didn't roam the streets with other teenagers thirsty for blood. He either wrote or drew or talked. According to his Grandma, he could do that at the age of eight months. He was a skilled caricaturist, who could imitate any person regardless of

their age or gender, he sang arias from classical operas, and was a little chubby in his early years which only added to his attraction.

His dad, if he had the chance, or rather had he allowed himself to do so, would have enumerated his son's admirable qualities by saying that, for instance, "at the age of eleven, Your Holiness, he staged Goethe's Faust with the girls of the neighbourhood. Girls because nobody else was willing. Faust at the age of eleven! He played Mephistopheles, the devil, in our yard, Your Holiness. *I'm so sorry I mentioned the devil to you. But he played a chubby, lovable Mephistopheles because he himself was lovable even when playing the devil, and particularly when singing serenades to Faust's sweetheart.*

"Incidentally, there is a video recording taken in June 1989 as proof of this eleven-year old child reciting Goethe in his mother's yard. Indeed, Your Holiness, this son of divorced parents was brought up with the constant care and attention of both grandmothers! They raised him and never taught him to be disrespectful or indecent. Not as you suggested, quite hastily, in my opinion. So, please excuse me. We're dealing with a very particular child. *I had the cameraman come along because I guessed something out of ordinary was taking place. Yes, its really extraordinary when an eleven-year old stages a play about the pact between God and the devil with the help of little girls from his neighbourhood, and when he recites the enormity of the whole thing for everybody to hear, wearing the tails his aunt made for him, and warning us of the importance of saving our souls. Is that a poor upbringing?"*

"He's been going to anti-Soviet rallies", the grandmothers could have said, especially the one who's more sensitive and emotional and who could easily have seen off high-ranking clerics. "My grandson has always been an exceptionally well-organized and a highly ethical boy. Others would break their toys within a day or two. Some would immediately gut a giraffe or a teddy bear. But my grandson staged tetralogies with those giraffes and bears. You couldn't get them in our empty shops at the time, so our friends brought them from other Socialist countries. *If other kids misbehaved and tormented their poor parents, making them wonder how they could amuse them, our boy entertained himself: he would place a board on his knees and draw amazing caricatures!*

"You'd have been amazed had you seen it. Mostly he drew politicians, starting at their heels and completing the picture in a matter of seconds. He was so skillful that his drawings amazed experienced artists. Once he stunned his German teacher who normally terrified the entire school. Apparently, she was trying to explain something, but quite awkwardly, to the kids when our boy mentioned Siegfried, his favourite character, among others the teacher had hardly heard of. When he was small and before he got chubby, his dad used to sit him on his shoulders while he was drawing, and they listened to Wagner. The vinyl was a bit scratched from overuse but was still loud, a bit too loud for me, in fact. The boy was literally raised on his dad's shoulders! They hardly ever spent time apart! Before he started reading, we used to read books to him, then later we couldn't tear him away from them, unlike other kids who counted the pages they'd read to earn some play time.

"*If at the age of nine he asked for a puppy, at eleven he bought Mozart's flute concerto with my pension money. He was intellectual, but not shy or closed up or sad. Quite the opposite, he was open, had a good sense of humour and was rather entertaining. I remember when we had visitors for family celebrations, he would amuse them with his imitations – speaking like a drug-numbed Brezhnev or Shevardnadze who was considered a traitor at the time. His paternal side understood him better because we immediately sensed he was artistic. However, his mum failed to spot it and*

decided he had to join a skiing club, then a rugby club and finally a water-polo club to help him grow more manly. He absolutely refused to accept the rough informality of his coaches because impolite and offensive behaviour was unacceptable to him. *If anyone thinks he wanted to insult anyone, they are gravely mistaken. In his twenty-three years of life he hasn't offended anyone. It's just not fair!"*

Who knows what other things they would have wanted to say to the people who kept us locked in the room with yellowing wallpaper in the building belonging to the Tbilisi Patriarchate, where they were threatening me with excommunication or labelling me a prodigal?

Sadly, that day no one heard the evidence of my virtue, Granny's voice was muffled by the soft cushions of the Patriarchate.

There everybody's favourite word was sin.

In the 1980s I was genuinely innocent.

Mum had made several attempts to motivate me physically but in vain. Skiing and rugby proved boring, I preferred attending our class meetings of the National Freedom Party, or watching our TV, enlivened by Gorbachev's Perestroika, till midnight. That's why she resorted to a strange, sporty-like, religious experiment very typical of the period: she sent me on a three-day walking pilgrimage called Saint Nino's Way. My aunt, fourteen years older than me, was supposed to keep an eye on me.

According to the new tradition inaugurated by the Patriarch, people – or rather potential new churchgoers – had to take the same road that Saint Nino took in the 4th century when she walked from Paravani Lake to Mtskheta, the then capital.

The undertaking was serious, joyous and adventurous, but the prospect neither attracted nor thrilled me. However, I couldn't oppose Mum. She called it 'a march' and asked me to view it as a cultural and educational expedition, rather than something sporty (because I absolutely hated sport as such). Actually, she lied to me because the whole idea of the pilgrimage was to walk across the country; she had assured me I wouldn't have to walk a lot. She also promised that if I felt tired (my grandmas worried about my flat feet), my aunt would put me in her confessor's car. The word 'confessor' had a therapeutic effect on me. My aunt mentioned one of my classmates, though not a member of our National Freedom Party, who was following his sinful father in his attempt to walk in Saint Nino's footsteps.

An unexpected complication became a real catastrophe: my aunt had been walking with the others along the road taken by the saint, who was only two years older than her when she brought Christianity to the country. The marchers stopped along the way so they could wash in rivers, lakes or use village school showers under the pretext of getting baptized again. But for some reason the day I left to join the march, she had received permission from her priest to shower in her own bathroom. So, we traveled in opposite directions.

I arrived to hear she had gone: only the faithful were around.

Basically, I was on my own with priests and nuns...

Of course, I cried a lot for someone aged eleven, and begged the man who brought me (incidentally, my classmate's sinful father) to put me in the same car to go back. But it turned out the car wasn't an ordinary one, nor was its driver, because he was required to drive a portion of the holy

road. Only then, and with a priest's blessing, could it return to the city with me, but not before it had driven at least two hundred kilometers.

How was I to live or walk two hundred kilometers?

The good thing was that everyone tried to console me, including my classmate, who told me immediately that he had been fasting for a month and hadn't tried masturbating once.

By the way, I had no idea he masturbated at all because I was absolutely innocent. We were only eleven or twelve, so I took his story with a pinch of salt: how come he had reached puberty so early? Because I was good at drawing, by classmates sometimes asked me to 'draw sex', but what could I draw if I had no idea what it was? I tried a couple of times, but my drawings were unanimously rejected for not being believable.

Anyway, it turned that my classmate had already made his first confession, telling the priest about his mortal sin. He couldn't have lied, could he?

Everyone was extremely sympathetic. They supported me. I ate freshly baked bread, cheese and tomatoes, drew caricatures, was given a lot of attention and even listened to Father Davit's (the priest leader) caring and heart-warming words. They had a soothing effect on my vanity as I was aware that he was an authority figure for the group. I was pleased he had taken me so close to his heart given the catastrophic way in which my aunt and I missed each other.

It filled me with such confidence that I decided to sing an aria in an empty teachers' room of the village school that had been turned into a temporary camp by the pilgrims. I wanted to feel more at home and also overcome my fear of strangers. However, a ruddy, unshaven, round-cheeked novice monk immediately pointed out that this was not a suitable place for entertainment. He opened the door, looked at me with his blood-shot eyes, and told me in a quivering, croaky voice that either meant he hadn't slept or spoken for a long time:

'You can't sing here. People are praying.'

The young monk had dark circles under his eyes and looked like someone who could easily turn nasty if you crossed him. He was the kind of stranger I didn't want to stay around: seemingly calm, but aggressive. He disturbed me.

Needless to say, I stopped at once.

So again, I was absolutely alone and feeling quite vulnerable. I didn't stay in the teachers' room but made my way into the long hall where backpacks were strewn everywhere. People were lying along the walls, shoes off, exhausted or perhaps seeking some inner peace.

There were huts outside. And women were sitting along the fence, looking at the priest who was squatting by the rusty football goalpost. They were smiling with embarrassment. The priest's haughty tone, full of contempt, seemed to underline that he saw them as simple, provincial women:

'How many abortions have you had? Twenty, forty?'

I already knew the meaning of that word, so I stopped nearby.

'What's so funny? I'm serious!'

It was still Soviet times. The women didn't know a priest could ask such questions. They weren't yet scared of their god, so were rather amused by it all, covering their toothless or gold-toothed mouths with their calloused hands, and laughing at the ridiculous priest.

He was a madman in their opinion.

He just smiled, aware he was talking to uneducated village women – a Soviet mob in a remote Meskhetian village. After all he was one of the elite; that's how he saw himself in comparison to them.

'You don't think abortion is wrong? Marx and Engels won't help you. Who has had a church wedding? If you only went through a civil marriage, you can't be considered your husband's lawful wife. Did you know that? Do you think I'm making it up? Do you have a husband?' he asked one of them.

The woman just laughed, waving him away:

'Leave me alone, for god's sake.'

'Do you have a husband or not?'

'She does!' the others replied, 'And two sons, too.'

'What about a church wedding? If you haven't had one, it means you've sinned for sure. I can perform the ceremony if you wish.'

The women didn't answer.

It was the second time I had heard a discussion about sex since I had arrived: first it was my classmate who told me he hadn't done anything of that sort for a whole month and now the priest was telling the village women they were sinners because they had had babies without a church blessing. I was confused as to who was making fun of whom – the women of the priest or the other way round.

'See?' he looked in my direction hoping to find a bigger audience, but discovering only me, he smiled. 'How can one educate these people?' Then he turned to them again, 'Do you at least believe in God?'

His question remained suspended in the air.

With a deep sigh the priest rose to his feet, but he wasn't old enough to make a convincing groan.

Nothing else happened that afternoon.

But my classmate, his sinful father and I slept in the cozy house of a peasant, on the floor set aside for visitors, rather than in the school.

Every village house in Georgia has such a floor while the owners sleep downstairs in rooms which have pressed earth floors. They keep the upstairs room for visitors, believing it should look like a palace hall. It usually has a musty smell, a tall bed with a thick dusty mattress and bolster, a polished piano (with dolls on it) that no one has ever played, a wooden table that can be extended to accommodate more guests, and an enlarged, black-and-white photo of the dead parents or grandparents. As a rule, the dead look down on the living as if scolding them for allowing strangers to stay upstairs even for one night.

That's where my protector, Father Davit, usually stayed. He wore a heavy cross on a thick chain on his chest, which he entrusted to me with before going to the outdoor toilet. He took it back when he re-emerged then washed his hands and stroked his beard with his wet hands.

'Are you upset?' he asked, and then added without waiting for my answer, 'Don't worry, you'll be looked after.' Father Davit had some news for me: 'Tomorrow is a big day. You'll carry the cross and lead the pilgrims.'

Carry the cross?

He didn't explain what he meant, just put the chain over his head carefully, and then strode off towards the shack where a group of young singers were waiting for him, expectantly, overjoyed to be there at all.

'He'll put you at the head of the procession,' my classmate explained, 'to lead the rest of us.'

True to his word, when dozens of people got ready to begin another long stretch of the holy march, Father Davit gave me a rather large slanted Andrew the Apostle's cross and told me to walk slowly.

'We'll walk at your pace,' he added.

Apparently, it was the custom to put children in front. Later, Mum and my aunt explained Father Davit's decision was influenced by his deep knowledge of child psychology: had I walked like the rest, I'd have been bored, while leading the way with the cross involved responsibility.

Anyway, my classmate had restrained himself. His hand had not erred for the entire period, but he was somewhere at the back while I was honoured to head the procession from the front.

Hard to believe, but all those people were following me. Of course, the priests showed me the way, among them the one who had tried educating the village women and the ruddy faced monk who had scolded me for singing in the teachers' room. The wooden cross turned out to be rather heavy and, to add to my problems, the nun behind me kept telling me to hold it higher for everyone to see. Basically, it had been pointless drawing caricatures and singing at the top of my voice, because neither would have made me a better centre of attention: now I was the cross bearer. I thought my parents would be thrilled.

Their son, the cross-bearer!

Along the way I entertained myself by imagining how delighted they'd be at school when they heard about my important role. What would my girl classmates say? How amazed my strict German teacher would be: 'What? He led the way for a whole group of pilgrims?' And what a jolly greeting party might await me in Borjomi. Praised by the leaders of our national independence movement – Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava! That arrogant priest who had rebuked the village women for having had abortions could now easily reprimand me for pride. I imagined how one of the dissidents recognized as a national hero would proclaim at a rally that we were bringing Christianity back to the country: 'Look at the little boy carrying the cross!' And what an ovation would follow. We would join the rally, and I would climb up to the platform, past starving protesters wrapped in blankets, then proudly stand by the flag-bearers with my cross. Somewhere among the crowd I'd catch a glimpse of my girl classmates admiring me. I would particularly enjoy seeking one of them out and asking her with my eyes: 'Do you now regret not inviting me to your birthday party?'

Along the way the priests baptized people in the river Mtkvari. Nearer Borjomi, our group argued with an intellectual pagan. One of the physically strong deacons even tried to drag him into the water. The pagan turned out to be a physicist resting near Borjomi with his wife and a baby. Stubbornly, and a little foolishly, he claimed that if he ever admitted the existence of a god, it would be an ancient Georgian deity. But he was deadly serious, saying that accepting Dali and re-introducing her cult would be more significant for the self-realization and re-establishment of the Georgian nation than Orthodoxy:

'Nationalism is stirring; our religion must also be national. That's what our country needs!'

The pagan wore the thick-rimmed glasses every medium-income Soviet physicist wore at the end of the 1980s, together with a rather shabby white shirt with a vest pathetically showing underneath. His young wife, holding a two or three-year old toddler, stood by his side, listening fearfully to her husband's scandalous but highly patriotic declarations. Very soon, she realized, he could be badly beaten up.

'How can Georgia stand out from other nations in today's world? Just with its language? The script? Its traditions?' the pagan asked the deacon. 'It's not enough. We, Georgians must have our own pantheon, just as we used to. We might have Orthodoxy, but why shouldn't we also have Dali's Temple? What's wrong with the Armazi or Zadeni cults?'

The pagan was surely playing a dangerous game: he mentioned Armazi to people who had spent a whole month following the path taken by the person responsible for destroying that very cult.

'He's possessed,' someone said.

'Those were idols! Do you want Georgians to pray to Satan and abandon their true belief?' the deacon yelled at him.

'They can pray to whatever or whomever they wish. Religion should be a matter of choice. Some will go to church, others to the Armazi Temple. That would be extremely interesting for the rest of the world. They'd say that a historic nation has an ancient, very specific belief, strange, but fascinating.'

'Isn't Christianity old enough?' the deacon persisted.

'Leave him, he's possessed,' others told him.

'We've been Christians since the 4th century, or rather you have.' The pagan seemed to deliberately want to annoy the deacon.

Then he turned to his wife, 'Let me talk to these people. Please go home and put the baby to bed.'

And he went back to the argument, 'How many years have foreigners thought us Russian? Nearly two centuries. Even today some don't know we are a completely different nation, very unlike each other! We have different language and script, a different culture, why can't our religions be different, too? Why do we need to be either Orthodox or Catholic when we've got our Amirani?'

'I'm going to hit him,' a man standing next to the deacon whispered. The physicist's wife grabbed the arm of her pagan husband and dragged him away, just in time, to their shabby cottage. And because the toddler began to cry, the deacon decided not to pursue him, though his intention had been to baptize the pagan, which would have been the climax of the dispute.

The pagan physicist proved to be the only exception. Everyone else was baptized: those we met along the road, those at home, some brought by their family members, mainly the children and grandchildren of those grandparents who hadn't been baptized in Soviet times. Our robust deacon said that in the past parents insisted on baptizing their children, now it was the other way round.

There were about a thousand pagans waiting for us in Borjomi: schoolteachers, former Komsomol secretaries and local party leaders, former and active October society kids, pioneers, veterans of WWII, medal winners in Socialist competitions, village intellectuals, drivers, doctors...

They were baptized in their tens and hundreds. Whether it was a brook, waterfall or river, queues of semi-clad people were waiting. Women waded into the water in their dresses, men were naked from the waist, with rolled up trousers, or else they took off their clothes completely. The priests walked into the water and, without wasting any time, vigorously dipped men, women, and children. The word used was 'plunge' and everyone seemed to like it. With soaked, heavy surplices, the priests stood proudly in the water, repeating the same words with a mixture of exaltation, deliberation and joy: 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen!' Most of the people had never learnt how to cross themselves, so they felt awkward or embarrassed, not sure what to do with their hands. They raised them or held them at their chests, obediently waiting their turn.

The widespread enthusiasm proved contagious, awakening something new in them, as if they were about to become a part of something truly important and much better.

For the elderly men and women, religion was a relic of the pre-Soviet past; monks and nuns were seen as not a particularly significant part of that tradition. Now they approached the wet-bearded giants (the priests had to be physically fit to baptize them all) with a humble smile, expecting to be given a new important role. Some believed baptism was an integral part of Gorbachev's Perestroika and if they refused to join in the general zeal, their lives would be negatively affected. Those who were afraid to be in the minority had to become part of the majority struggling for independence. Only those who had been persecuted for dozens of years would be saved: so they joined the majority by becoming religious.

There were some who were baptized four or five times. They rushed into the water bravely, asking the priests to 'plunge' them again and again. Sometimes groups would walk into the water together, families with naked babies, the elderly, barely able to walk on their own or just out of their sick beds, skeptical individuals, usually men, barely resisting their wives. And if someone only came to watch their relatives being baptized, there was no chance for them to go on leading their pagan lives – they, too, were 'plunged' into the water.

During a mass baptism in Mtskheta, near Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, the number of people was so high, there was literally no room in the river to take them all.

Later, I found out that my grandfather, an extremely passive member of the Communist Party and the director of the Institute of Labour Protection, was baptized together with his neighbours in the river Aragvi.

I don't remember my original baptism because I was only about a year old, and no one would have told me about it if it hadn't been for the moment when my godfather's beard caught fire. He was a young artist, bearded like my dad, an untamed student of the Academy of Fine Arts, dismissed for wearing a surplice during a service in Sioni Cathedral, and temporarily terrified because of the fire, possibly seeing the similarity between this event and the much-sought Holy Fire at Easter. He was the same man who tried hijacking a TU-134 plane six years after my baptism and was fatally wounded attempting to escape from the Soviet Union.

But now, quite unexpectedly, somewhere near Borjomi, where the Mtkvari was rather shallow and where the pilgrims of our procession were baptized for the second, fifth or tenth time, I found myself in the water. 'Come, come deeper,' the wet giant with a long, tangled beard ordered me. And I, the grandson of my grannies, a pampered, skeptical boy, stepped into water that reached up to my waist. Without a second's delay, the priest got hold of my head and dipped me into the water, roughly, even dangerously, as he held me under the water, and said something, probably the same words he had repeated many times. He lifted me up, dipped me again, then lifted and plunged me in even deeper. So deep it scared me. He held me so forcefully that I couldn't have resisted if I'd tried. It was an unusual experience: I seemed to be fainting under the water, for a split second, but the moment I was lifted out, I was the same polite, docile child. Now I do remember my baptism because I was older, not the baby I was in 1977.

It was on the banks of the Mtkvari, packed with the crowds wishing to be baptized, that I met Mum and my aunt who were thrilled with my heroic deed, and my grandma, who was irate at their thoughtlessness. All in all, I had walked forty kilometers carrying the cross.

I didn't want to abandon the cross but I couldn't walk anymore ('The boy has flat feet, do you want him to collapse along the way?' Granny fumed).

We reached a compromise: Father Davit magnanimously allowed me to carry the cross again when the worshippers reached Mtskheta a couple of days later, but before that I could go home and think about the road I had taken.

There was no authority higher than him at the time.

Though Mum was nervous, she was still happy with the outcome: I had stayed away from TV for several days, was baptized again, wasn't scared of wading into water fully dressed, had changed a little (which was her *idée fixe*), and had led a partially sporty, partially naturally wild (meaning manly) life, at least for a short while.

'Leading the procession again would be a bit big headed,' she told me. 'Let's go to Mtskheta and wait for them to march in.'

In that day and a half I spent with them, I seemed to have grown accustomed to the rhythm and regime of the pilgrim life, complete with long marches, the stopovers for baptism, the kind-hearted attitude, and the excitement with which villagers greeted us. More importantly, I felt my own personal significance. I had walked as far as Akhaldaba, as if I had accomplished something that distanced me from my earlier self. My aunt and I swapped places again – I went home, while she joined the pilgrims. Or rather, I went back to the myself of two days before, the reality I had left a short time ago: the same voices transmitted by a TV enlivened by Perestroika, and the same smell that permeated flats in summer. Anyway, three days later, before I could forget the experience, I followed the enthusiastic women of my family to Mtskheta, where St. Nino's march was to finish at Samravro Convent.

The man whose photo nowadays features on religious calendars, the walls of church shops and donation glass boxes in supermarkets, collecting money for monasteries and various charities, lived then in a monk's cell in a small tower by Samtavro Cathedral and smelled of fish. In fact, I thought it was fish because he didn't eat meat but liked fish, but I was told it was the specific body smell that only recluse monks have and they are called *salos* (apparently from the Greek for 'a fool').

He was said to have burnt his Soviet passport and publicly called Lenin, Satan, for which he was locked in a psychiatric ward. The *salos* had two coffins – one for his elderly mother, the other for himself. He was outspoken, often quite rude and very direct. Once I heard him telling a woman to move away from him because she was a temptation. Despite his manners he was much liked, most believers said he was 'cute', immediately crossing themselves lest their words could be interpreted as too informal.

When the march was over and Father Davit was conducting the celebratory service to mark its completion, *salos* Gabriel rushed to the pulpit, interrupted the sermon, crossed his huge arms on his chest and shouted, first loudly, then somewhat furiously, that when the devil played the white piano, he had failed to resist the temptation to dance.

'He kept playing and I just couldn't stop dancing! I, a monk, was laughing and dancing!'

Those watching and listening never expected that as a closing speech for our march. At least I certainly didn't because I had never seen a old dancing man before.

'Where have you come from? What road did you take?' the monk smiled toothlessly. It turned out he wasn't as old as he looked. 'Who are you?'

Father Davit stepped aside, lowering his head as if he was a schoolboy expecting to be chastised.

'That's what the devil did to me, so imagine how he can tempt you!' the salos shouted, then danced gracefully towards the altar. 'He's strong, too strong. If he was able to make me dance, what can he do to you, poor souls...'

As best he could, Father Davit tried to stop him, but the salos waved him off, and even snarled at him. Then suddenly he spread his arms theatrically and put his head under the priest's long beard.

'Saint Nino,' he said, repeating it two or three times, and crossing himself. 'She hasn't come yet. The devil made me dance through the night...'

After those words, he now bowed meekly to Father Davit.

'God bless you,' someone behind me said.

It was so inappropriate and false that many people hissed to silence the speaker.

All that was very interesting, much more than Father Davit, Mum, my aunt or I could ever have imagined, but I didn't want to stay any longer. The suffocating environment, that funny and scary salos, and all those unthinking but agitated people, unnerved me. Basically, I couldn't relate this event to what I had seen along St. Nino's route. Was it truly festive and good, or unbearably unnatural and terrifying? I had definitely enjoyed carrying St. Andrew's slanting cross and in my dreams I was praised by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava at an anti-Soviet rally. However, in reality, I couldn't forget that eccentric pagan physicist, and his pale, frightened wife holding their baby in her arms, and trying to take her arguing husband away from the threatening crowd.

Luckily, the service finished quite quickly, but, unexpectedly, Mum, my aunt and some others thought it would be disrespectful towards Father Davit if they left without making their confession, particularly since he didn't get the thanks he deserved because of the ludicrous speech of the salos as he danced to the devil's music.

'Will it be embarrassing if we leave without confessing?' Mum asked.

A minute ago I had witnessed something eccentric and absurd. Now I faced an ethical problem.

It turned out I had to confess along with everyone else – my first confession. It could be seen as the natural conclusion of the long march. But, unlike my classmate, I really had no idea what to say because I considered myself completely innocent, which I was. I had no idea what to confess to Father Davit.

Was I supposed to imagine sins to humor him?

'It's impossible not to have sinned,' my aunt's friend told me. Like other young women, she seemed to have a crush on Father Davit. 'Take a deep look into yourself!'

I was angry. I felt it was a form of violence, even from Mum who seemed to be on my side, but I also thought there was no harm in a confession, which would surely please Father Davit. But I had to say something, right? Something that would make him feel appreciated. I was embarrassed thinking that he would waste his precious time on me telling him my petty sins: I made a little girl cry, I was impolite to Grandpa...

'Idleness is a sin,' said a woman with a glazed look, and sitting on a stone. 'So are gluttony and lying.'

I didn't know the meaning of all those words, so I tensed, painfully trying to recall or even invent sins that would be worthy of confession. I even thought I could take on someone else's sins for the occasion, for instance, my Granny who had drowned kittens in her childhood.

The task became more complicated when I was told to make a list of my sins so as not to falter while trying to remember them all during the confession.

Strangely enough at the time, many felt the urge to let priests know as much as possible about their private lives, particularly those who had nothing of the kind. Eagerly, diligently, they filled pages and pages in slanting handwriting, confessing to possible or impossible sins, committed or just imagined, and those that had turned into serious transgressions, but in reality non-existent...

Those who had made the arduous journey and attended the service to mark the completion of their mission were now sitting down, notebooks on their knees, earnestly remembering their sins. Some wrote My Sins, others The List of My Sins.

Mum decided to help me with my list. I failed to recall any real sin, excluding a glimpse of a porn film I caught on my neighbour's video-player about the debauched life of Empress Catherine II. So I was able to shake Mum off, and wrote on a white piece of paper:

My Sins

And added numbers:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

I was deeply ashamed to talk about my true sin, so I approached Father Davit with a request I'd rehearsed beforehand:

'Father, please help me because it's my first confession.'

It meant that the exhausted priest, who most probably didn't suspect I was trying to show my respect towards him, had to come up with questions for a sinful boy.

With a sad, downcast expression, Father Davit was sitting by a water pump, clearly too lazy or tired to listen to or think about my sins.

Finally, he forced himself to ask me:

'Do you make your parents angry?'

'I do,' I replied gladly.

'Are you lazy in your studies?'

'I am.'

'Do you use bad words?'

'I do,' though I didn't.

'Have you hurt anyone's feelings, for instance, a friend's?'

'I have.'

'How?'

'I have.'

'How was it, tell me.'

'Oh, I don't remember. I need to think...'

'Do you have bad thoughts? For example about a person who has angered you. Have you wanted bad things to happen to them?'

'Yes.'

'Wished them dead?'

'Yes... No...'

'I see,' he was pensive for a minute.

For some reason I was sure he would ask me the question that had forced my classmate to admit his main sin. And had he done so, I would have been obliged to admit the sinful thought I hadn't been able to drive out of my head since watching a particularly graphic scene from Catherine II's life.

However, he asked me nothing like that, instead he said:

'Would you like to add anything?'

What could I say? I couldn't take on my classmate's real or imaginary sin, but I absolutely refused to mention Catherine II. Instead, and I have no idea why, I told Father Davit earnestly:

'I am scared of extraterrestrials. Everyone talks about them. I wonder if they exist in reality.'

It was a completely idiotic thing to say, and somewhat unsuitable for my age. Suddenly Father Davit was wide awake, eyed me closely, probably trying to guess my age, and then said quietly, after pausing and deliberating:

'You know, you have to avoid it, at all costs...'

Avoid what? Extraterrestrials or such thoughts?

I knelt, Father Davit put his hand on my head and prayed.

Then I sensed he put a sign of the cross somewhere in the air above my head.

It's 1989. I'm running down the long corridor at school, chased by the deputy principal demanding I put the red pioneer's tie around my neck.

He's panting – it's hard to shout and run after children at the same time.

The Soviet Union is about to collapse and our school was considered freer than most. We had been openly burning our pioneer ties in the yard, but our young deputy principal was working himself up into such hysterical state that we feared he might have a heart attack.

He yells for everyone to hear, his voice reaching every classroom on five floors:

'Put your ties on or I'll chop off your heads!'

And all the while, we – the members of the local Independence Movement and the leaders of our small National Freedom Party - were scrambling around in fear, wondering what makes a man demand we wear red ties when no one cares to live by Soviet rules any more.

He's despot. I had seen with my own eyes how he had dragged my classmate around the drinking water fountain. His yelling is bloodcurdling. In fact, he's the last man to shout until he's blue in his face:

'Red ties are obligatory!'

It would be mortally embarrassing if he catches one of us party leaders to spin around the water fountain as he did with that poor chap. And with the entire school to see! I'm the Vice-President, while the President, my namesake and classmate, a poet, is running ahead of me. If the deputy principle catches up with us and kicks either of us, we'll have to dissolve the party.