



# THE SOUTHERN ELEPHANT

**SETTING:** Tbilisi, Georgia; Vilnius, Lithuania; the 2000-2010s.

**THEMES:** family ties; fatherhood; friendship; the city; childhood; legacy; generational trauma.

**GENRE:** family drama; romance.

**ADAPTATION:** feature film; mini-series.

## SHORT SYNOPSIS:

The principal character has an epiphany on a journey through the turbulent recent history of his city, Tbilisi which includes the collapse of the Soviet Union, a newfound independence, and civil war. The novel revolves around the narrator and his childhood friend Tazo. They both dreamt of becoming film directors, but Tazo's life has taken a different turn. The plot takes place over one day as Tazo asks his friend to let him use his apartment for a rendezvous with his lover. The narrator goes for a walk to leave the two in peace, wandering the streets of Tbilisi till dawn. Different characters and stories appear in his thoughts transforming his story into a reflection on his past.

## MOVIE REFERENCES:

**Stand by Me** (1986) a film by Rob Reiner

**A Man and a Woman** (1966) a film by Claude Lelouch

**The Best of Youth** (2003) a film by Marco Tullio Giordana



## CHARACTERS:

**The nameless narrator** – the protagonist – a middle aged man engaged in a cathartic re-evaluation of his past and present

**Tazo** – the narrator's childhood friend, an unfulfilled, unrealized creative, who represents the stagnation and apathy of his generation

**Nelly** – the narrator's lover and kindred spirit

**Mediko** – another childhood friend, heartthrob of the city in her youth

**Uncle Rostom** – Mediko's father, a shy, homebound pianist

**Leo** – a neighbourhood mate who has always been in love with Mediko; he's a lost case of his generation, aimlessly roaming the neighbourhood and getting entangled in the narrator's mess

**Vidas** – the narrator's friend from Latvia

**Keti** – the narrator's daughter, a curious, sensitive girl whom the protagonist reveres



BOOK SAMPLE

## SUMMARY:

The story begins with the narrator-protagonist waiting to meet an estranged friend Tazo at his apartment. Tazo has asked to use his place for a secret rendez-vous from early morning. With this demonstration of discreet male friendship, the narrator begins to take us through his thoughts and past and onto a tour in Tbilisi, his hometown, while roaming the streets until dawn.

Two friends exchange awkward small talk. This scene unveils the reason behind the title of the novel – they look at an old photograph of theirs, standing by an archaeological artifact – skeleton of the Southern Elephant. In another episode, the narrator's archaeologist mother's dying wish is to be buried with a volcanic prehistoric weapon. Archaeology symbolizes the futile digging of the past, metaphoric remnant of the past that need to be stripped off, to set the next generations free.

The first two characters we meet on the narrator's stroll are his childhood friend and neighbor Mediko, who lives with her pianist father, shy and homebound uncle Rostom; and Leo, who spent his youth in love with Mediko, until he went to jail for a criminal offense and lost his tooth and all hope for stealing her heart.

The protagonist takes us on a Joycean journey of observations and introspection. He encounters an old professor of his and Tazo's by the bookinist stand in the city, who opens another chapter of a memory line – lives of their university mates. Most of his youth pals found their place in the world of cinema, like the protagonist himself and unlike Tazo, who used to be the brightest of them all. The two friends used to see the world in a film frame. The narrator is a Carraway-esque character who passes the story to us as an observant spectator, and Tazo is supposed to be his Gatsby, the person he admires and aspires to, but an absent one, who declines to participate. The memories are shelled with the remnants of the Georgian civil war of the 90s. In the scene at the hospital, while Tazo, being rolled on a stretcher in a hospital, whispers two words in his ear "the subjective shot", trying to explain how he saw the world upside down – the chain of flickering light bulbs on the corridor ceiling.

The main female characters streaming into the protagonist's thoughts and memories are his mother – cold and absent scientist; his daughter Ketii and his lover Nelly. He tries to be a better parent for his child, a better generational example who would not pass on the weight of a skeleton of an extinct mammoth. He tries to show her life, rather than instruct. He takes Ketii on one of the movie shoots that becomes one of the most tragic incidents in his life: The crew was shooting a story of British soldiers commissioned in Georgia before the Soviet occupation, featuring one of them who came through with the promise and took his Georgian bride with him after fleeing. The parkour artist who is supposed to do the stunt gets heavily hurt after the jump from a prop train, the scene that is described as pivotal, coming-of-age point for Ketii, who witnessed the shoot.

This moment also makes him more vulnerable and brings father and daughter together.

Memories about Nelly, a former lover, make it clear they were ready for the end from the very beginning. Nelly was an occupational therapist helping him with sprains. Their love was born in his apartment and that was the only secluded space for it, not to count one time when Nelly introduces him to a friend in a video call, her ardent attempt of making their love seen, but still secret. During the day stroll the narrator thinks of Nelly and obsessively checks the Instagram account of her husband, stalking images of her domestic and leisure life.

Toward the end, the narrator gets himself into a situation where another blind bullet is fired and his neighbor Leo gets shot in the foot, not wanting to intrude Tazo's privacy, he drags Leo into his youth sweetheart's, Medikos's apartment to a beautiful spinster and her father, creating a comical situation and enraging both Leo and Mediko. Back in the apartment, he finds Tazo still there, and inspired by the memory lane, he tries to have a word, stating that their god-forsaken city is not a bad place after all. Tazo responds characteristically promptly and on-point "it's horrific".

Nevertheless, the novel ends with hope. The narrator chats with his daughter online, trying to play cool and use emojis like her, and gets a glimpse of her day as she is studying overseas at the moment. We witness healing and hope for riddance from a generational trauma, which the protagonist's generation failed to do. As a final image, the narrator shows us a photo of air balloons in Vilnius sky, in a message he received from Vidas, his friend who lives in Estonia. Vidas has been waiting for the balloon cascade to pass by for months now, and it finally happened. The narration ends with his remark – "What can be better than realizing that your friend is experiencing a sudden joy?!"

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Writer, actor, wildlife guide, photographer and birdwatcher, Archil Kikodze stands out as one of the major names in contemporary Georgian literature. He graduated from Tbilisi State University's department of Oriental Studies. Later he mastered the profession of cameraman and screenwriter at the Tbilisi State Institute of Theatre and Cinema. Kikodze started writing in the late Nineties and for almost twenty years was actively working on short stories and guidebooks. He has published two award winning novels: 2017 Litera and Ilia State University prizes for *The Southern Elephant* and the 2021 Saba prize for *Lizard on the Gravestone*. He has also written non-fiction titles: *Norwegian Diaries* and *Mexican Diaries*. Kikodze's literary work explores and creates dialogue between the generations by looking for answers to their questions.