

Journey to Karabakh

OTHER WORKS IN DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS'S
GEORGIAN LITERATURE SERIES

The Literature Express
Lasha Bugadze

adibas
Zaza Burchuladze

Contemporary Georgian Fiction
Elizabeth Heighway, ed.

Dagny, or a Love Feast
Zurab Karumidze

Journey to Karabakh

Aka Morchiladze

Translated by
Elizabeth Heighway



DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS
CHAMPAIGN / LONDON / DUBLIN

Confidential review copy

Originally published in Georgian as *Mogzauroba Qarabaghshi* by
Bakur Sulakauri Publishing, Tbilisi, Georgia, 1992

Copyright © 1992 by Bakur Sulakauri Publishing
Translation © 2013 by Elizabeth Heighway

First edition, 2013
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

More'ilaze, Aka.
[Mogzauroba Karabaghshi. English]
Journey to Karabakh / Aka Morchiladze ; translated by Elizabeth Heighway. --
First edition.
pages cm. -- (The Georgian Literature Series)
ISBN 978-1-56478-927-3 (acid-free paper)
I. Heighway, Elizabeth, translator. II. Title.
PK9169.M58M6413 2014
899'.969--dc23
2013040512

Partially funded by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency



Georgian Literature Series is published thanks to the support of
the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia.



www.dalkeyarchive.com

Cover: design and composition by Mikhail Iliatov

Printed on permanent/durable acid-free paper

Confidential review copy

It all started at the end of February.

Georgia was at war with itself, if you can call what we had a war. President Gamsakhurdia had just fled the country in any case, chased out by the National Guard and the paramilitaries of the *mkbedrioni*. I didn't care about any of that back then, and I care even less about it now. It was the end of February and all I could think about was Goglik and his latest stupid idea. He wouldn't stop going on about it. Come on, man, he'd say, let's go! Achiko Qipiani will give us the money—all we have to do is take it and go! But I just couldn't be bothered driving back and forth all over the goddamn place, and in winter to boot. Why on earth would I want to? Anyway you couldn't buy gas for love or money back then. But he wouldn't let up: Come on, let's go! All we have to do is drive there, pick up the grass, and we'll be stoned till next autumn, for free!

Blah blah blah. I didn't want to go. I hadn't been into that stuff for ages. I might fancy a smoke maybe four or five times a year, maximum. And how dare he think he can drag me halfway across Azerbaijan, anyway? I'm not a kid anymore. You go, you bring it back, and then you can tell everyone how you went to Ganja and came back with a load of hash—Ganja, yeah, I got it in Ganja, that's right, man, I brought back a load of drugs from Ganja, and on and on and on. But he just kept going on about it: Come on, come on man, drive me to Ganja . . . And once Goglik gets an idea he can't let it go. Stupid bastard. Anyway, eventually he left but later that night he came back with Qipiani in tow. Qipiani's a big guy, built like a buffalo. He sat there fiddling with a set of worry beads.

“Gio,” he says to me, “look. None of the dealers in Azerbaijan will sell to me anymore, the bastards. You’re Gogli’s friend, and that makes you my friend too. Come on, it’s a couple of days, that’s all. I’ll make it worth your while.”

He’s persuasive like that.

“What about gas?” I asked. I’d already decided to go.

“They’ve got gas in Azerbaijan, so you can fill up there,” he said. “I’ll give you twenty liters to get you going.”

He could damn well help me push my Lada across the border, then. Twenty liters would barely get us out of Tbilisi. It was less than half a tank. I drove over to my father’s and went up to his apartment.

Nana and Irakli were the only ones at home. Irakli was watching a Schwarzenegger film, sitting curled up so tight in the armchair I barely noticed him. I went over and gave him a kiss. He sat there wide-eyed, clutching an assault rifle. A toy one, of course. Irakli is my brother and he’s five years old. Nana is my father’s wife. They didn’t get married until I was in my last year at school, but I remember her being there even when I was still a little kid. My father was always bringing her back with him. Then one day he moved in with Nana and left me the apartment on Kavsadze Street. My father’s in his fifties and Nana is thirty-five, still just a young woman really. As my friend Duda says, she found herself a nice comfy spot next to my father’s millions, and found me a nice spot outside in my car, the Lada. Irakli’s got her eyes—soft and dusky.

My father’s one of those old men who still runs around like some kind of big shot, flashing his money all over the place and loudly reminding everybody in earshot that if they don’t like it, they can fuck off. They’re like a little mafia clan, him and his friends. He’s out all day “taking care of business” and hanging around with his cronies, only coming home at night. He’s out somewhere now, too.

Journey to Karabakh

“Where’s he gone?” I asked.

“He’s manning a roadblock,” Nana sighed.

“A roadblock? What kind of roadblock?”

“They pull cars over at night. Confiscate weapons. Oh, you know.”

I started to laugh. “What, he’s joined the police now, has he?”

“Not the police, it’s some kind of military operation. I don’t know. It’s the usual suspects, you know, the Mikaberidze brothers, Ramishvili, Sasha, Buba . . . They’re all there.”

“Keeping the peace and maintaining public order, right?”

“He’s lost it, Gio, he’s completely lost it. Running around waving a gun in the air . . . Are you hungry? Can I get you something to eat?”

“No, I’m fine. Do you know if he’s got any gas?”

“He should have. It’ll be in the cellar. Take the key and have a look.”

So far so good.

“When will he be back, Nana?”

“I don’t know. Tomorrow morning probably. Why do you ask?”

“I’m going away for a couple of days.”

“Where?”

“Yerevan. Just for a couple of days, with the boys, you know . . . I just need to get out of Tbilisi for a while.”

Nana thought for a moment.

“Come on, let me make you something to eat. Are you taking her with you?”

“No.”

“Then why on earth are you going to Yerevan?”

“Why on earth am I staying in Tbilisi?”

“Thank God you broke up with her, Gio. Tengiz was going out of his mind.”

“Oh come on, Nana, give it a rest . . .”

AKA MORCHILADZE

“If you’re here to borrow money you can just come out and say so, you know.”

I laughed. “I only need a bit.”

“How much?”

“A bit.”

“A thousand? Two thousand?”

“One’ll do me.”

“There’s about fourteen hundred here. Take it all.”

I took a thousand. I gave Irakli a kiss and Nana a wink and went downstairs. In the cellar I found a long line of gas canisters. So much for shared resources. I heard footsteps and looked around. It was Nana.

“I won’t tell him you’re going. He’ll only get angry.”

“Okay.”

“Take your phone off the hook. I’ll tell him you popped over today and that you can’t call because your phone’s out of order. I’ll tell him you’ve met another girl and you’re holed up with her. All right?”

“What if Tengiz gets himself shot, Nana, what’ll we do then?”

“Honestly, Gio, what a thing to say . . .”

“Well, seriously, what on earth does he think he’s doing, running around like a revolutionary at his age?”

“I know. To tell you the truth I’m really scared. He just keeps saying that if they’d got him last summer everything would be fine now.”

“Yeah, right, reclaim the city and all that crap . . .” I laughed.

. . .

I went home and stumbled up the stairs. It was so, so dark. I hated those goddamn power cuts. I’ve got an ornamental Japanese candle with twigs around the outside—*ikebana*, I think it’s called.

Journey to Karabakh

I've been burning it all winter and the damn thing never burns down. They must be some weird kind of Japanese twigs, because they never burn and they don't smell of anything. Anyway, I lit my candle and sat down next to it. I hadn't slept in my bed since the war began. I slept in the armchair, with my candle on one side and my radio on the other. I couldn't care less what was on the radio, but every night my father would call and ask:

"Did you listen to the news? What did they say? Uh-huh, right . . . freedom . . . uh-huh . . . is that all? Did they say anything about us? Hm . . ."

I'm a one-man press office, I am. I'm Tengiz Mikatadze's daily digest.

Then I find myself falling asleep listening to the radio, and in the morning when I wake the candle's still burning, and it still hasn't gone down. Jesus, between the three of them they're driving me crazy: this candle, those puffed-up baritones on the radio, and my father, the aging revolutionary.

I spent hours staring at the damn candle that night. There was one thing that kept going round and round in my head and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I didn't know what to do anymore. Maybe it was because of what Nana had said, or maybe it was just that memories kept popping up in my head . . . I don't know. I started cursing inside. It was all aimed at Goglik, of course. Whenever I'm pissed off about something I curse Goglik because he's an idiot, such a goddamn idiot. I can't think of a single occasion when he's done or said anything remotely sensible.

What I'm trying to say is, it's not like I only remember a few funny little details, and I don't remember it all like it was yesterday. No, I remember it more clearly than that, so clearly, so sweetly and deliciously, that even now it makes my stomach flip.

It was October. I had no car back then, and not much else, either. One night I went out with Goglik, Duda, and Vato Amirejibi. It wasn't a brothel, exactly, it was just some seedy dive

full of women on a housing estate somewhere, near Varketili I think. Duda said it was his little harem, that the girls were all up for it, and that if we played our cards right they'd let us come back again. So we picked up some drinks, cakes, cigarettes, and so on, and off we went. There were four of them. We smoked, drank, had some food, and then Vato went off with one of the girls and Duda went off with another, which left me and Goglik and the two remaining girls. Goglik grabbed one of them by the hand and started pulling her over. The girl stood up. She seemed in no hurry. She had tired eyes, and I remember she was wearing a black T-shirt and loads of rings.

"We're going to get some fresh air," Goglik said, and flashed me a twisted grin.

I don't know what came over me. I suddenly felt sorry for that weary and unsmiling girl. I say girl—she was three years older than I was.

I never remember girls' names, and I couldn't remember hers either. It didn't sound Georgian, I remembered that much. I jumped up and pulled Goglik out into the hall.

He laughed happily. "Have you got any hash?"

"I want your girl," I said. Blunt, and to the point. It's the only language he understands.

"You're horny, then?" Foul-mouthed bastard. He was always so crude.

He seemed to find the whole thing hilarious, going back inside the room and coming out with the other girl. I went back in. The first one was sitting at the table with her head buried in her hands and her hair hanging loose. I couldn't see her eyes. She was biting her lower lip.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Yana," she said, and stood up. She seemed like a nice girl. I knew she wasn't just going to fall on her back and spread her legs.

Journey to Karabakh

Suddenly the door opened and Duda rushed in, wrapped in a sheet.

“I need a smoke, man.” I can see him now, picking up the crumpled pack and winking at me.

He went back out and the door closed behind him.

Yana walked over to the window. In the distance I could see lights on in the windows of crumbling tower blocks in some faraway suburb. I went over to her and put my arm around her shoulders. I'd never done anything like this before, never acted like this with anyone in my life. I had no idea what to say. When you're with a group of women you pretty much know how they're going to behave, what they'll say and where they're going to pinch you, and you know how you're supposed to act too. But this . . . I suddenly remembered that earlier, while we were eating, she'd been the quietest of all the girls there. Had I been staring at her all along? I don't know. We don't usually give women that much thought. We just turn up at the parties, making sure we've tidied ourselves up a bit first. We don't really mind, even though it might seem like a pain in the ass at the time. After all, women don't want some scruffy bastard who smells like a farmhand jumping them, do they? Someone like Goglik . . .

So anyway, there we were, standing by the window like a scene out of a corny love song. Suddenly her shoulders started to shake and she began to cry very, very quietly. It was as if something she'd been suppressing was bubbling up from inside. She was sobbing so softly I could barely hear it. It had been the last straw, I think—the way me and Goglik had traded her and her friend like cigarette lighters. She stood hunched over strangely, as if she was trying to make herself smaller, and pressed herself into my chest. She stood there burying her head and crying.

I didn't know what to do. I decided to take her back to my place. I led her outside still clinging to me. After some time I managed to flag down a taxi and we left.

AKA MORCHILADZE

When we got to the apartment she paused for a moment in the doorway, her hair still in front of her face, her eyes hidden. I led her into the bedroom; I wasn't thinking about sex at all, though. She collapsed onto the bed and started sobbing again. I had never felt so sorry for anyone before. I didn't even think about coming on to her. I just sat there and looked at her.

"I'll make you a coffee," I said at last and left the room. When I brought the cup in, she was still lying there but she was no longer crying. I sat in front of the mirror and leaned against the wall. I can't remember what I thought about. I can't remember when I fell asleep.

I awoke to her touch.

She was sitting in front of me with a listless, barely perceptible smile on her lips and was stroking my face with her fingers. I remember kissing her hand, almost instinctively. She looked stunned.

"I should go," she said suddenly.

I jumped to my feet and kissed her. Guys don't kiss that kind of girl. Like they're all so pure themselves . . . They want a woman, but lips disgust them. I wasn't even thinking about that, though. I felt different, strange, somehow content and replete. I didn't know what the feeling was. How could I? I hadn't loved anyone since preschool. Maybe it was because her lips were dry, just like mine. I don't know.

"I should go," she said again, and gently took her hand from mine.

And Yana left.

I didn't forget her. I kept thinking about the outline of her face, her fingers, the damp corners of her eyes. I couldn't remember precisely what she looked like. I couldn't get her out of my head. I didn't want to look for her. I knew if I did I'd never hear the end of it . . . You can always count on friends to jerk you around. Goglik

Journey to Karabakh

kept on retelling how I'd swapped girls with him, and every time he did I felt ill inside, even though I pretended to laugh.

Yana had just disappeared.

Another month or two and I probably would have forgotten her altogether.

I can still remember it now. It was Christmas, one of those cold, colorless Tbilisi mornings. We'd been up all night partying, and by the time they threw me out of the car in front of my building I was horribly drunk. I ran up the stairs to my floor and saw something that made me stop so suddenly I only just managed to stay upright. There at the top of the stairs sat Yana. She was wearing a pale coat and a beret. She still had those same tired eyes and her lips were incredibly pale. She was huddled against the banister like a bird in winter. It was like a scene from a Charlie Chaplin movie.

I remember how cold she was, completely frozen . . .

Then, once we were inside, lying on the bed and smoking my last cigarette, I found I could breathe so freely that I thought I was somewhere else, in some amazingly serene, calming place I didn't quite recognize. I felt as if I might never leave the apartment again.

Yana was such a quiet girl. When she walked from room to room she did it without making a sound. We didn't talk much. Even the weather was silent and still. We didn't go out for three days straight. First Goglik rang, then Nana came around with half a cake and some other bits and pieces. Yana was having a wash. The door to the bathroom was open and Yana was wearing my sweater, with nothing underneath. She didn't even hear the door. I wasn't about to make her hide in the bedroom, was I, or tell her to cover herself up?

Nana was speechless. She managed to keep her composure, but I could see the look of horror flash across her face. She didn't stay five minutes. When I closed the door behind her and turned

around, Yana was standing in the bathroom doorway. Her hands were still wet and seemed frozen in midair. She looked as if she was ready to run.

“I should go,” she said, just like before.

I guessed—or rather I imagined—what would happen once she had gone. I would go over to Goglik’s house, and then from there we’d go on somewhere else, and from there somewhere else again. We’d sit around, smoking a couple packs of cigs and maybe something else too, if we had some. Then five or six of us would go to some party or other and Goglik would end up either getting knifed or knifing someone himself, and I wouldn’t get home till the early hours. I’d put the phone back on the hook and two minutes later—at most—Nana would call: “Tengiz was asking about you . . .” and all that crap.

Yana was everything to me. She embodied something I never even knew I wanted, something I had never even dreamed of. I think she represented the very thing people live for. I still don’t know what family means. I don’t understand all that crap about how family is a sacred institution. But it didn’t matter; I had never been so happy, I had never felt as calm and together as I did then. I did more thinking and dreaming that winter than I had ever done before. I didn’t turn the television on, didn’t let my friends in when they came around, and every single morning I went out to buy fresh bread. I would even have done some work if I’d had exams to pass, but I was already doing my diploma and I’d paid someone to do my assignments for me. The only time Yana left my side was at weekends when she went back to her aunt’s or uncle’s place somewhere on Moskovis Prospekt. While she was gone I’d wear her plain green scarf around my neck and wander around at a loss for what to do. The guys already knew she was living with me, but they pretended not to notice. Goglik would make smart-ass comments about me needing to check with the missus before

Journey to Karabakh

I went out and all that, but I just never replied; nobody would understand what I had with Yana, least of all Goglik. Duda was the only one who actively disapproved. It was always obvious what he thought about me and Yana. When I think about it I understand why—Yana had been part of his “little harem.” He probably knew things I didn’t. A lot of things. But fuck him, I didn’t care. I had never been so happy. Everything was great and I was on top of the world.

We went everywhere together. Whatever the weather—rain, snow, freezing cold—we’d be out somewhere. Always on foot. There was one particular place we spent hours in, a cellar restaurant on Griboedov called The Mingrelian Kitchen. We’d sit there, Yana would push her hand into my pocket and hold mine, and we’d have proper conversations, like adults do, and Yana would smile and I’d squeeze her hand tight and . . . I was happy. I actually began to like being at home. Yana wore my sweaters under her faded coat, and when I bought her some fancy new Italian jeans, we just stood there and laughed.

I went to see my father. It was still early. He was in bed, with Irakli sitting perched on his stomach. They were wrestling. I told him I needed five thousand roubles. He lifted Irakli down onto the floor and sat up in bed.

“Have you been gambling?” He was all set to start shouting.

“I need to buy a jacket.”

“You’ve got a jacket. That—what do you call it?—that puffer jacket.”

“I want a new one.”

“You’re off somewhere, aren’t you?” The man’s crazy. He always thinks I’m planning to run off to Ingushetia or somewhere. Ever since my first year at university, when Morchila and I got picked up by the police halfway to Vladikavkaz. What right the bastards had to pick us up I don’t know. We weren’t doing what they thought we were.

“I’m not going anywhere. I just want a jacket. Where on earth would I be going?”

“How would I know? You’re sneaky little bastards, your gang.”

He got up, scratched his belly and called, “Nana!”

Nana came in.

“Where’s he going?”

“What makes you think he’s going anywhere? He just wants to buy a jacket.”

“You two are always whispering behind my back. The minute he walks through the door it’s you he goes running to. For all I know you’re both lying to me.”

“Why don’t I make you some tea, Tengiz?”

“You go with him. You can go and buy it together,” he said suddenly, and then turned to me. “Is it for Goglik?”

“No. Which bit don’t you understand? It’s for me.”

“Take the car.” He threw me the keys. “And don’t even think about dropping her off on the way. I don’t want to have to start phoning around to find out where you are.”

Now that I had the money I was happy again. I’d seen a jacket in town—some Turkish brand or another—and I wanted to buy it for Yana. I’d asked them to put it aside for me. Temur Panchulidze and a few other guys I know were in the shop at the time. Panchulidze took it down from the rack and told me he’d pay for it.

“Take it, Gio,” he’d said. “You can pay me back at the end of the week.”

You see? He’d never have said that to Achiko Qipiani. He knows Tengiz Mikatadze could buy the whole shop if wanted to, never mind the coat, that’s why.

Nana looked me up and down and then ran her eyes over the coat.

“It’ll never fit you,” she said. “It’s much too small.”

Journey to Karabakh

It buttoned to the left, too. Nana looked at me one more time, put the money on the counter, and then turned to me and said, “Go on, take it. I’ll be out in a minute.”

When she came out we sat in the car for half an hour in front of the shop. She asked me outright, but gently, the way she does, and I told her everything. By the time I’d finished she looked very anxious.

“Tengiz will go crazy when he finds out,” she said eventually. She was right, of course. Tengiz *would* go crazy.

“The two of you can’t carry on like this, you know. Things can’t stay as they are . . .”

“Why not? What do you think’s going to happen?”

“Gio, look, you’re a really good boy, but there’s just no way Tengiz will let you marry that girl.”

Let me marry her? You see? The only way they can understand what Yana and I have together is by forcing us into their stupid rituals and ceremonies, a hotel function room filled with roses and carnations, a reception with two hundred of my friends and six hundred of my father’s, a long line of cars holding up the city traffic, and some incontinent old codger carting in a load of doves for us to release . . .

“I won’t tell him,” she said. “Carry on as you are for a while—but if he comes over you’ll have to think on your feet.”

She pulled a metal bracelet studded with gemstones out of her bag. It looked Syrian or maybe Turkish. She slipped it into one of the jacket pockets.

“You’ve got no idea about buying presents for girls,” she said with a smile, and winked at me. I’d thought she’d bought it for herself.

Yana was asleep. I kissed her, then put the jacket on her while she was still only half awake. I pulled the bracelet out of the pocket and fastened it around her wrist. We sat together on the bed, laughing. I still think about it, I think about it all the time.

AKA MORCHILADZE

I remember it so clearly, and yet sometimes I feel as if I can't be sure whether things really happened as I remember, whether Yana really was that happy, whether we really did sit by the window on rainy days and talk about when we were little. It all seems so distant now that when I think about it I find myself groping for the memories. Yana, Yana . . . she was all I cared about and I never stopped to think what we were doing. I never stopped to think. As far as I was concerned, nothing could be better than what we had. I had no idea what we were going to live on or what our future would be like. Yana was so warm and light, like down feathers. When she slept she would rest her head on my shoulder and whisper things in a half-sleep. I'd lie there with my eyes closed, waiting to hear those sweet nothings in the silence of the night . . .

There was snow falling that morning. It was that sorry excuse for snow we get in Tbilisi, the kind that only looks like snow the moment before it melts into a muddy slush. That kind of snow. When I woke up, Yana was standing by the window.

She didn't even give me time to wake up properly before she said in that quick, quiet way of hers, "I think I'm pregnant."

I knew it was good news but had no idea what I was supposed to do next. I knew pregnant women had strange cravings and that if they asked for strawberries in winter it was up to you to find them. It felt strange; I felt as if I was being prepared for something, it was like a new challenge, that monumental sense of wariness you get when faced with something you have never experienced before. We spent that whole day outside walking in the snow, watching children racing around, middle-aged women walking their dogs, and old men doddering slowly around the frozen fountain. The sky above us was a still, dazzling white. As we walked through the park along snow-covered avenues, I felt so light I was scared Yana might slip through my fingers, melt away, and become

Journey to Karabakh

one with that exquisite cold air. That's the way I thought back then. I even fed Yana chocolates because I'd heard that's what you do when you're in love.

I wasn't really thinking at all, though. I wasn't thinking about Tengiz, and I certainly wasn't thinking about what had to come next for no other reason than that I knew what usually does, because in this great city of ours people care more about society's rules than about a child's life, or happiness, or the love between a girl and a boy. Yes, what mattered most was convention, custom, *right behavior* . . . Apparently it was okay for Goglik to be my best friend, but not for me to be with Yana. Nobody would have blamed my father if he'd killed me with his bare hands just for taking pity on a sweet, innocent girl, abandoned and trembling in that seedy dive, for falling in love with her, and for taking her home with me. And apparently I should have known this, because my father is Tengiz Mikatadze and not some common taxi driver.

But I didn't know.

Anyway, those bitches Yana had been hanging out with started sharing every last detail of our lives with Duda while he pumped away on top of them. I suppose they were trying to provoke him, mess with his ability to perform.

One Saturday night Goglik called.

"Are you alone? We're coming up," he said, and hung up. Twenty minutes later they were outside my door: Goglik, Duda, Tato, Vika, and Japara. They must have been somewhere nearby. At first I couldn't work out what they wanted. Goglik was the only one who looked the slightest bit happy. Duda seemed to be under a black, black cloud. He looked like hell. The rest of them looked pretty miserable, too; they stood there staring at the walls as if they were decorators.

"What are you going to do, Gio?" Duda asked me.

"About what?"

"Your woman, man, what do you think?" he said quietly.

AKA MORCHILADZE

Tato stared at me.

I must have looked blank. “I don’t know, really . . .”

“For fuck’s sake, Gio. You just can’t do this, man.”

“What’s your problem?”

“For fuck’s sake! You can’t do this, Gio! It’s just not right. This isn’t how a real man behaves! You just don’t this, not to your family, not to your friends . . . Christ, Gio!”

They took it in turns to tell me what they thought of me. I didn’t answer any of them. Duda’s hands were shaking.

“What are you going to tell Tengiz?” he asked me.

“Nothing,” I said.

“It’d be better for him to find out now rather than later.”

“I don’t know . . .”

They sat there staring morosely at me. I suppose they were right, too, according to the rules Georgians live by. As far as they were concerned, Yana was a whore. Goglik was the only one who kept quiet. He just sat there looking content as always. But then he’d known from the start. He might have been an idiot, but nevertheless he had an uncanny knack for guessing what was going on. He always kept quiet at times like this, though. I could tell that he couldn’t care less; he knew that whatever happened we’d all still be friends.

They got up to leave, and as Duda was going out of the door he paused and then turned to embrace me.

“Fuck it, Gio, you’re still like a brother to me, you know that . . .”

I laughed; he had a wild look in his eyes, no doubt because he was so anxious.

“Gio, I feel partly to blame for all this. If I hadn’t taken you there . . .”

“If you hadn’t taken me there I wouldn’t be as happy as I am right now.”

“I’m going to have to talk to Tengiz, Gio . . . God help me, I have to tell him.”