

Tsotne Tskhvediani

Mayakovski Theatre

The Truth of a Pathetic Gesture

It's the 22nd of November. Not ten in the morning yet. It's the time when every possible kind of tragedy has already happened in my town, though they haven't passed yet, neither has time cured their aftermath. As you might well know, tragedy repeats itself as farce, and we have only learnt to laugh as a result of it all. A hysterical laughter, which initially we thought to be an expression of self-irony that protected us from the pain, but very soon we realized that such kind of laughter was just wriggling. However, the narrative starts when we felt the need for drama. We could only act out a drama.

I am on a Mayakovski coach. My bag is at my feet. The driver's assistant collecting fares has offered several times to put it in the baggage hold but I refuse. There are clothes, some books and a dismantled hunting gun with two bullets in my black backpack.

My brother Tuta will take it along when he resolves to fight. As planned, we will cross the occupation border of Shida Kartli, shoot the soldiers at the very first checkpoint and will soon perish himself. It will be his final performance. The only way to release us from his own self. Now he's a home, rotting away alive. His stench kills Mum and my younger sister alike. I'm not sure how his action will be assessed. He might be dubbed a provocateur. No doubt, the authorities will go an extra mile to prove he was a mentally unstable loner.

Patriots, however, will most probably laud him, sharing his photo on Facebook. As years go by, his name might even find its way into history books. In twenty or thirty years from now, he might be part of history tests and students will surely write our long family name on their hands not to forget it. The terrorist who went to fight the occupants single-handed in the 2010s.

In truth, there is nothing new in his feat. When Turks and Persians occupied Kartli, drunken Georgians used to attack the enemy in twos or small groups, ultimately sacrificing themselves in the event.

The scenario of Tuta's demise is inspired by these things. But his performance is more than an expression of patriotism. For him, it is an anti-imperialistic action.

He is convinced that he will do it on behalf of every Ingush, Chechen, Syrian, Kurd, Iraqi, Ukrainian and Salvadorian. I don't really mind what he thinks. The thing is he should find the way to die.

Today I'll get the gun to him. He will leave home quietly. I'll stay behind. Calm down Mum and Sis when Tuta will be mentioned in the breaking news. We are about to live through an extremely difficult period, but it's all for the best, especially for Tuta.

I hadn't slept a wink at night. Hoped to nap on the coach but I couldn't. I opened the bag and rummaged for something interesting inside. I had several books in there, some already read, some abandoned half-way. I took out *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and found Tuta's letter inside, probably written about ten years ago. He ran away from home, leaving it behind for me. Strictly speaking, it wasn't a letter. But that's what he called it. On two pages taken from a notebook, he had written his version of the Icarus myth.

* * *

*Honey wing did Icarus have and
His heart burned sooner than his wing.*
Titsian Tabidze

Having fled Athens, architect Daedalus and his son Icarus found refuge on Crete. At the time, king Minos ruled the island. He warmly welcomed the craftsman and soon commissioned him to build a huge structure, Labyrinth, for his Minotaur, which was half man and half bull. It was for this creature that Daedalus was supposed to build a palace whose innumerable rooms and underground passages would make it impossible for anyone to find a way out, if he happened to get inside.

Daedalus spent many years on Crete. Initially, he was highly respected and even pampered, but with time he realized that he had become King Minos' prisoner. He could go nowhere. He had become the prisoner of the Labyrinth, his own creation. Daedalus decided to escape. He would sit on the beach, contemplating the ways of escaping King Minos. He was unable to come up with a viable plan. Once he glanced at the sky and suddenly guessed that the only way out was to fly. He resolved to turn his idea into reality. He collected feathers, tied them together with flex and strengthened their tips with wax. The wings were ready. Carefully, he tried to raise himself into the air. He was astonished at how easy it seemed. But flying long distances required a different level of mastery, which he tried to hone at night, without any witnesses. Finally, Daedalus shared his secret with his son. Icarus was only too happy with the possibility of escaping the island, but very soon he fell back into despondency. He hardly listened to his father at the flying lessons. Daedalus asked him about the reasons of his dejection. Icarus replied that escaping Crete didn't mean they would be free. Wherever they flew to, they would be prisoners of a local king, not achieving freedom they craved for. Daedalus got angry, saying sternly he could escape alone.

'Flying away is paramount, but however beautiful or safe an island looks to us, we mustn't land there. We must keep flying,' Icarus told his father.

‘Eventually, when we are exhausted, we are bound to die because we will crash down,’ Daedalus said.

‘Before that, we will reach the sun, burn in flames and return to the earth as warmth and sheer energy, which will give others the strength to fly too.’

Daedalus ascribed these words to his son being still too young. He strictly warned his son not to be disobedient and to follow him closely. Above all, he said, it was vital to keep a good balance when flying, neither too high, nor too low.

* * *

Despite it all, Icarus decided to fly to the sun.

The day before the scheduled flight, he shared his plans with his teachers.

‘You can’t fly, Icarus. You’re too weak for it. The wind will break your bones,’ the first one said.

‘You’re a fanatic, Icarus. It’s because you’re too young. You’ve lost the sense of reality if you believe you can reach the sun,’ the second one said.

‘Icarus, you’re a poet. You make belief that you’re flying to the sun, but in truth you’re going to fly in the safe space under your father’s watchful eye,’ the third teacher said.

However, Icarus was aware he couldn’t simply follow his father. He also knew he wouldn’t be able to reach the sun. His mindset was utterly pessimistic, but, at the same time, he felt an urge to act because he believed that his whole life would only be fully perceived during those precious moments when he flew towards the sun.

The big day came. Poised towards the sky, Daedalus was extremely majestic, beautiful like a free bird. But Icarus knew all too well that he would soon land and become a prisoner of yet another king. He glanced at his father for the last time and headed for the sun.

The Sixth Escape

I remembered the day when Tuta returned for the sixth time. When he went missing for the first and second times, the whole family, friends and neighbours were upset. The third time round and later, they just laughed. Some patted Dad on the back: ‘He’s bound to come back, sooner rather than later,’ they said.

I worried every time, fearing he wouldn’t return. Mum worried that he’d get into some trouble before he came back home. Elene was too young to understand what was going on. It was Dad’s responsibility to look for him.

When he ran away for the sixth time, we looked for him in the places he had been before. Then Dad went to the police. Finally, he decided to seek help from Maxim, the deputy head of our town police, who he had treated for pancreatitis.

Maxim visited us the next day. Dad took him into his study, asked about his health, even examined his abdomen. Dad advised him to stop drinking because his liver was still enlarged.

He was slim, which differed him from other police officers. He was over six feet tall, otherwise he was an ordinary man. He used to talk to you in such a way that in about two minutes you stopped doubting there was anyone as close and sympathetic as him. Whenever he visited us, Maxim would go straight to the corner with icons, but he never prayed. He just tidied the shelf: straightened the frames and dusted the shelf with his finger. Only after this routine he would begin to talk in his unhurried way. That day too, when he finished tidying the shelf, he said calmly:

‘Vasiko, dear pal, we’ve found your boy, but you don’t want to know at what cost. I’ve got an army of people I feel indebted to ...’

Dad was sitting in an armchair, smoking. He got to his feet, went over to Maxim and put his hand on his shoulder.

‘Now Dato and you can say you don’t owe me anything anymore.’

‘Oh, no, Vasiko, I didn’t mean it badly, but let’s drop it for the moment. The most important thing is that we’ve found the boy. I’ll bring him in the evening. Now it’s up to you to welcome him as best you can. You don’t need to make him feel worse than he already does.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘I left him with my cousin, on Tsereteli Avenue.’

‘Just one more request.’ Dad was fidgeting with his wrist watch, which meant he was very upset. ‘Don’t bring him in your car. Tell him to come on his own. And please ask your boys to be here at nine. But tell him to come a bit earlier.’

We Shun from our Past

Dad belongs to the Jeans Generation. There’s a lot written about them: romantic stories, some interesting, others dull. They were tough guy, not lost at all.

You could hardly call them the Lost Generation, but they did lose others around them. If anyone decides to study the mind frame and world outlook of those young people, instead of reading thousands of books and watching movies, it would be much better to have a single look into Dad’s study where Jim Morrison and Donald Reagan’s photos hang side by side. Only the Jeans Generation was able to simultaneously admire those two. In fact, they understood neither of them.

I don’t intend to dwell on this because you are well aware of who did what, running around with goggles, leather jackets and automatic guns. Some died, others started businesses of their own. Dad was among the lucky ones. He had his history of street life, then became a doctor and businessman. He was much loved, stories were told about him.

Apparently, at one of the birthday parties, he didn't take to a young man with glasses and dragged him out of the flat onto the landing to teach him a lesson. Someone took pity of the lad, saying he was a philology student, unaware of the street rules, urging Dad to leave him be. Dad immediately began to talk about Borges. The lad had surely heard about the writer, but after two more questions Dad guessed he hadn't read anything by him. Dad swore at him, saying he was no bloody philologist, and kicked him down the stairs. You might have heard similar stories, so I won't go on.

In the 1990s, when I was born, Dad bid goodbye to his earlier lifestyle. He moved out of Tbilisi to his native Mayakovski together with his family. That's the name we still call our town, though, as you might well know, it's back to its historical name – Baghdati.

Soon after that, Dad gave up his medical practice. Though he had opened a clinic near our house, he didn't see patients anymore. Instead, he busied himself with a casino-cum-restaurant, which he called Mayakovski, the old name of our town. It was so popular, sometimes the visitors couldn't be accommodated.

Mainly, they came from the capital, often bringing along their foreign guests. They liked enjoying themselves without any prying eyes. Dad devoted all his time to running the business. In truth, he only found time for his family when Tuta would run away from home. On that day too, he had closed the casino and sent his security to look for Tuta. He too, rushed from place to place, phoned some people for help. After Maxim's visit, he was visibly relieved. He ordered a real feast and, starting from seven in the evening, his old friends began to arrive. Gedi, the gastroenterologist, was designated as the toastmaster, but he refused, at least initially. Others were sipping wine, as if sampling it. It was nearly eight. I was sitting at the gate, waiting for Tuta.

I didn't notice how Dad approached me and sat down beside me. I was sitting on a low railing, but Dad looked rather funny as he squatted nearby. He rested his chin on his knees, just like a child, and looked up at me. I averted my gaze.

'You're waiting in vain. He won't come back,' he said quite confidently.

'Why's that?'

'He won't.'

'He will. He's embarrassed, but will come later, when all the guests are already here.'

Dad rose to his feet, ruffled my hair and repeated:

'He won't come back!'

I was utterly confused. First I thought he simply wanted to annoy me with that talk, but his voice, his tone was very different ... As if he really willed Tuta not to return.

Maxim's car appeared at nine. He drove noisily down the street, brought it to a stop with a screech, jumped out, raised his arms and moved around in a dance-like stance. Then he went to the passenger door, opened it and lifted Tuta in his arms, as if he were a toddler. He carried him across the yard, laughing. He didn't look at me. He rushed up the steps onto the veranda, went over to Dad who was sitting in an armchair and put Tuta on his lap.

Everyone laughed loudly. I blushed at the ridiculous scene, not sure what to do with my feet. Inwardly, I was swearing horribly at Tuta. Actually, I thought he'd die of shame but

I was mistaken. I glanced at him furtively. His face was very calm, even seemed pleased with the spectacle. Soon he was hugged and kissed by our aunts and neighbours. Then Mum came out and hugged him.

Suddenly, Gedi roared, insisting that everyone drank to Tuta's happy homecoming with an enormous horn. Of course he referred to my brother with his full name, Davit. They kept drinking well into the night. Everyone hugged each other and then Tuta, all at once. They never let him leave the table.

Dad drank a lot. At one of the toasts, when everyone got to their feet, he tried to rise, but swayed and sat down again.

He dropped his head and sat silently, but in a couple of minutes he sprang up and slapped Tuta, who was sitting opposite him, across the face. Then he spat at him.

'I'm ashamed!' he muttered, then yelled, 'I'm ashamed!'

Maxim rushed to pacify him.

'What's wrong with you, Georgevich¹? The boy's back. No need to push it further.'

'Why is he back? Motherfucker!' Dad made to hit Tuta again.

Tuta was near tears. His voice quivered as he repeated over and over again:

'Dad, what's wrong with you?'

Dad, in his turn, kept saying he was ashamed.

Tuta pulled himself together and attempted to ease the situation:

'Dad, please, I promise not to embarrass you anymore. I won't run away, will study to become a doctor, a better doctor than you ...'

Dad grimaced, but it wasn't clear whether he was in pain or mocking Tuta.

'A doctor like me!'

He struggled to rise to his feet and went to his bedroom, rather unsteadily.

Mum tried to calm down the guests, but everyone felt uncomfortable having witnessed the ugly scene. They soon bid goodbye and left. Tuta sat at the empty table, crying. He was twenty at the time.

The First Coming Back

Tuta is seven years older than me. He isn't very tall but has wide shoulders and when seen together, someone might think he's taller than me.

In our childhood, we used to play football on the nearest pitch. As a rule, one boy would have a first choice of his team players, one by one, while the other one would choose from the pool of those left. Those 'captains' would fight over each player as they wanted to get the strongest ones, which meant that the weakest and inept were left as the final choice. In fact, it didn't matter which side they ended up in because they were too weak, not worth fighting over for. Tuta was never happy with such a set-up. He used to tell the strongest

¹ Russian urban way to addressing someone with his father's name, commonly used in Georgia.

players to be together, while he took all the weakest, fattest or the smallest ones for his team. He wasn't particularly good at the game, but had a tactic of his own. He would stay near his goal-keeper, sometimes never even crossing over into the opponent's side of the pitch. He let others play in the attack, but attempted to pass the ball to them. Watching him was a real torture. He would slide right under the opponents' feet, so his knees were bleeding all the time. If he had a chance, he would get the ball and pass it to his players, but they rarely tackled it, either missed or lost it immediately. His side often lost 10:0. Others tried to explain that his approach to selecting the team was unfair, that it only made sense if both teams were more or less equal, but Tuta never listened. He wasn't interested in playing otherwise.

He used to play football till he turned 16. Then he began smoking and drinking. Once or twice he tried to play, but his heart raced and his breathing became so strained that he had to give up.

From time to time he used to go to Kutaisi and stay with our uncle. He was friendly with a group of musicians there. Once, when he came back, he told me that one night when he was walking across the White Bridge, he saw a girl standing on the railing. Tuta rushed to her and held her tight by her waist for some time. Then others joined him to find out what was going on. He left without even looking back. It was the period when he spent a lot of time in Kutaisi, so I didn't see him very often. By then, he had quarreled with nearly all the neighbourhood boys and didn't like being around. It all happened because of Natia.

She went to our school but I hadn't noticed her before, probably she had been recently transferred from another school. Anyway, nearly all boys bragged they had screwed her. I was about nine or ten at the time and wasn't particularly interested in such things, but as we were smoking in the toilet, a couple of boys told me that they could let me screw her if I wished. In short, for about a month or two Natia was the only talk of the whole school.

She was a thin, fair girl with red cheeks and a panicky look. Even before all the mayhem started. In the end, the boys wouldn't let her walk in the schoolyard, shouting obscenities at her, mouthing very fast: wn bljb?² fk ur sl!³ wn ma prk?⁴ Then they would laugh their heads off. In the beginning, Tuta was indifferent to the whole thing. Several times we were together when the boys met her with their catcalls, but he didn't utter a word.

But one day, when lots of boys were smoking in the toilet during the break, he announced that she was his girlfriend and if anyone said anything bad about her, he would have to act. The boys were stunned. First they thought he was joking. One of them even shouted: 'Fine, bro, we won't say anything about the fucking girl, but I wouldn't mind screwing her once more.' My brother hit him in the stomach. In another minute, Tuta was beaten so badly he could hardly walk. They stopped only because they thought he was bleeding from his mouth. Actually, it was his split lip.

² Wanna blowjob?

³ Fuck your ass!

⁴ Wanna my prick?

'Do you really like Natia, you asshole?' I asked him in the evening, trying to stifle a laugh.

'Watch your mouth, boy!'

'Come on, say it, Jorge Enrique.' (There was a soap opera on with the character.)

'No, you idiot.'

'Do you enjoy being beaten up?'

'Listen, boy. Do you really believe the whole school has screwed Natia? You do, don't you? Did you play with your little dick when boys told you about her? I guess she's snogged one and he told his dumb buddies about it, exaggerated the whole thing and if one said he screwed her, others could say the same.'

At that time I felt terribly embarrassed. I was sorry I hadn't thought of defending Natia. I was jealous of Tuta. The next day he told me he was going to fight the boys again. I begged him to take me along, but he refused, saying I was too young. He crept out in the evening and returned badly beaten. Without moping blood from his face, he rushed into Dad's study, lifted the sofa and drew out a machine gun. Mum caught him in the act and began to scream. Dad was in the kitchen but was in the study in a jiffy. This time it was Dad who beat up Tuta.

When we woke up in the morning, Tuta was gone. His clothes as well. Dad looked for him everywhere but without any success. Tuta returned three days later. It all happened several years ago. Tuta had finished school by then and Natia was expelled. Naziko Nakashidze had to be brought back with the smelling salts. The poor woman had walked into the geography room and saw nearly naked Natia with three boys. The following day Father Archil was asked to consecrate the room.

* * *

When dramatic stories are remembered, they often say it was like a movie. With Tuta, things happened but you could never say it was like a movie. At most, you might have been reminded of a low budget film, or *Zombie Apocalypse*. But there, the main character is the one who kills zombies while keeping his own human side. The viewers watch the whole thing through his eyes. But if someone decided to make a movie about an ordinary zombie, that would be the one about Tuta.

In Mayakovski, after seven in the evening, the streets are practically deserted. You might come across a couple of completely hopeless street lads, or husbands driven out of homes by their wives.

Tuta loved strolling in the evening. Sometimes I accompanied him. That evening we heard shouts coming from Laghidze Street and rushed over.

Three young men in black leather jackets were kicking a lanky guy they had pinned to the ground. The poor guy was so tall that all three had plenty of room for kicking, without getting into each other's way. The hitting was regular, as well as loud swearing.

Tuta immediately plunged into the midst. Initially, it seems he meant to stop the beating, but his efforts were futile, so he rammed his fist in the neck of one of the attackers. He fell down at once, coughing violently. His two buddies looked taken aback. Instead of setting on Tuta, they helped their friend. Tuta saw his chance to hit both of them.

But they were no weaklings, so Tuta received a couple of hard blows. At first, I wanted to stop them, but if I didn't get into the fight, they could have beaten my brother really sore. I wasn't very good at fist fight, so I crept behind one of them and grabbed him by his waist. I pulled him down as hard as I could, he lost his footing and I pressed him to the ground. Then someone kicked me painfully in my side. In short, it was some brawl. In the midst of it, we heard a scream:

'Don't help me, assholes! I'm getting what I deserve!'

All five of us stopped, gaping at him in disbelief.

The lanky guy was crying and pleading:

'They're my buddies. I made a mistake and have to pay. Don't interfere.'

Then he ran to one of the attackers who had nearly spilled his innards and tearfully pleaded with him, swearing he had no idea who we were.

'Did you hear it, assholes? Who asked you to poke your bloody noses in our business?' the guy in the black leather jacket who received Tuta's fist in his neck rasped.

Tuta neighed, choking with laughter. He bent, holding his knees, then straightened up and hit the guy in the neck with his fist once again. For a minute I thought he would surely die this time. He fell down, flailing his arms helplessly.

As his two buddies dragged him away, they swore at us, promising to see us the next day.

Tuta and I remained in the street, together with the lanky guy.

'What was that shit about deserving it?' Tuta roared.

'Listen, bro, I screwed up and deserved what I got. If not now, it'd be much worse later.'

'Fucking goon,' Tuta yelled at him and hit him hard in the jaw. The guy fell down and this time it was my brother who kicked him, exactly like the other three had twenty minutes earlier.

With difficulty, I pulled him away.

The next day the three thugs came to our block bringing along twenty others as well as the lanky guy.

In accordance with the street laws, we were accused of wrongfully hitting the three young men in black leather jackets. That was pretty clear, but we were also held responsible for beating up the lanky guy too.

The whole thing could have been cleared through talking it through. Or we might have apologized, but Tuta was being quarrelsome, trying to hammer a semblance of moral into the lanky guy's head.

The thugs were soon fed up, so they badly beat us up. Tuta was bleeding. I dislodged my arm and they didn't hit me in the face. The lanky guy was the nastiest, hard to restrain

though his buddies tried hard. I was near tears as I got home. My arm hurt terribly and I was swearing at Tuta.

He tried to calm me down but I didn't want to hear him.

'Shut up! You just need to poke your bloody nose everywhere, that's why now you don't even know if it's blood or snot running down your nose.'

'Do you mean we just had to pass by, not helping him?'

'A hero, ha? Actually, you walk around dazed, not really giving a damn if someone dies right before your stinking nose.'

'It has nothing to do with heroism.'

'Remember the chicks?'

'What chicks?'

'Get lost. I don't want to talk to you.'

'What chicks are you talking about?'

'I said, get lost.'

Erto

Furious as I was, I took pity of Tuta and didn't tell him the whole truth about the chicks.

It's an old story. I must have been nine at the time.

It's not a huge secret that they still keep cows, chicken and even pigs in our town. When I was little, it really annoyed me. Once I even wrote a school essay about it. I said that our town will be very different, a true town, when there is no smell of dung in the streets. My teachers praised me. I was genuinely upset when I saw pigs strolling down the streets. The poor things rummaged in and around litter. They must have been suffering from all sorts of diseases because they moved awkwardly.

Daro, our neighbour, also had a whole farm in the middle of the town. The stink of dung from her yard reached us.

I'm not sure if she was aware of my attitude to all this, but one fine day she gave me a tiny chick to raise and take care of. It was a cute white birdie and I fell for her. I called her Erto.

I used to play with her a lot. In the end she was smarter than a dog. When I called her, even if she was at the other end of the yard, she would dash to me. Always got under my feet. Used to twist her neck, close her eyes and wait for me to pat her.

Vey soon Erto grew up and began laying eggs. Once I couldn't find her though I looked up and low. I suspected the worst, thinking dogs might have eaten her. Finally, we found her in the basement. I tried to lure her out, but she flatly refused to leave the place.

I ran over to Daro and told her that Erto was dying, begging her to help. She calmed me, saying my Erto was brooding.

In the evening Daro came over, made a cozy nest for Erto, arranging her eggs on dry straw. Soon the chicks hatched, the two of them – a white and a black one, probably having taken after its dad.

Erto busied herself with her chicks. I didn't much care for them because they weren't as playful as their mum. Neither was Erto in for our usual play. Being mum made her rather serious. But when I came back from school, she would still meet me at the gate.

One day Erto failed to greet me at the gate. I searched for her everywhere but couldn't find her. Mum was with me all the time. I looked at her at some point but she averted her eyes. I didn't guess it right away, but when I glanced at her again and she again turned her head away, I demanded the truth.

'I buried the chicks. But I don't know where Erto is.'

'Did they die?'

'Tuta stepped on them by accident.'

'Bastard! Why would he do that?'

'It wasn't intentional.'

'How's that?'

'He was walking deep in his thoughts and treaded on both of them.'

'I'll kill the bastard!'

'Tuta taught you those words, didn't he?'

Mum was angry but knew it was the wrong timing to show it, so she hugged me. She asked me not to tell Tuta about the accident. She said he was upset, thinking about his problems, pacing the yard, unaware where he was stepping. I still wanted to fight Tuta, but Mum pleaded with me for so long, I promised her not to.

Later I told Tuta that the chicks had died of chicken plague.

At the time I felt very proud. I suddenly realized I was wiser and stronger than my older brother and I had to help him.

The Second Escape

Virgin Mary's Day was nearing and our neighbours had laid a table in the lane. They were drinking vodka and singing. Actually, no one needed a religious festival as a pretext for more drinking. They used to drink regularly. Then they would sleep it off during the day and sit down to some more drinking in the evening. By the end of August days were so scorching nobody ventured outside for fear of a heatstroke. But if one is stone drunk, he doesn't give a damn whether it's hot or snowing outside.

Several boys, Tuta and I were sitting in the yard, watching the feasting group from a distance. They had a large plastic bowl with a tomato and cucumber salad on the table, chasing each piece with a big glass of white wine. The scene was disgusting. Shoving their huge greasy paws into the bowl all at once. When they nearly finished the salad, they dug at the bottom of the bowl, mudding the remains. I've heard that beer-drinking cultures are very

different from, for instance, the French who prefer wine. Though they drink wine in Georgia, it's so watery and imbibed in such amounts that they are closer to the beer-drinking people than to the wine culture ones.

Apo approached the feasting group. He sat at the table and stared at them, frowning at each of them in turn.

'Want some wine, Apo?' one asked.

Apo didn't answer.

'Here, have some,' the second man said and poured wine into a glass.

Apo moved the glass away. Instead, he addressed them in an angry tone:

'Ya don't share with an outlaw, do ya? Have ya forgotten how to show sympathy? If I were ya, I'd put a bite or two into a basket and send a child into the woods with it ... Ya dunno nothing.'

'You're a fucking fool, Apo. Who the hell you're hiding from in that bloody forest? Are you complete nuts? No one's looking for you, man!'

'It was pricks like ya who killed my grandpa Aprasion Merkviladze, ya motherfucking rats!' Apo yelled and grabbed the glass as if intending to splash the wine into someone's face. Then apparently he changed his mind and drained it in a gulp. He rose to his feet and walked away.

'The fool's raving mad, fuck him,' the feasting men muttered and forgot about him immediately.

Tuta jumped up and ran after Apo. I followed. He caught up with the man and gave him a fiver.

'Here, buy yourself something.'

'How can I, boy? Have ya seen an outlaw shopping?'

'Come on, Apo, nobody's looking for you.'

'How do ya know? The place teems with rats.'

'Fine, I'll get you something,' Tuta said with a smile and headed for the shop. He turned back to ask, 'What shall I get you?'

'Fags, vodka and somethin' to chase it down.'

In about five minutes Tuta was back with a package of Viceroy, bread, some sausage and vodka. We sat down under a shady tree. Apo drank a lot, Tuta just sipped some. I refused to have any vodka. Apo offered sausage but the smell of vodka killed all other senses. I was off food at the time.

'Apo, who was Aprasion Merkviladze?'

'Hey, Tuta, shame on you if ya dunno who he was.'

'Of course I do, but please tell me about him.'

'He was an outlaw, revolutionary, highwayman and fugitive ... whatever ya might call him. He liked no Bolsheviks, no Mensheviks, but when Alikhanov-Avasky came to Ozurgeti and bathed in the blood of the crazy Gurians, Aprasion teamed up with his bomber buddies. He tried several times to kill the motherfucker, but he escaped. In the end, he still knocked him off.'

‘But what did that Alikhanov-Avarsky want from the Gurians?’

‘Ha, by the 1900s the Gurians lost their mind, forgot their Bible and started to teach Marx’s *Capital* at schools. Then in 1905 they announced the independence of Guria, but ya know what kinda independence it was? Aprasion also had his republic in Shorapani, there were others in Nadzaladevi and Khashuri. At the time, if ya were a tough guy, ya had to have a republic of ya own. So, the Tsar sent Avarsky to punish the raving Gurians and he slaughtered half of them. The revolutionaries and outlaws sentenced him to death. He was to be punished in such a way as to teach others a lesson. Aprasion took on the task. In such things he cooperated with both, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.’

In the meantime, they had finished vodka and sausage between them. Apo was all geared for more talk, but Tuta could hardly hold his head. As Apo made to leave, Tuta stirred back to life and wouldn’t let him go.

‘Come on now, I’m going to treat you to a real banquet,’ he mumbled.

‘I’ve already feasted, Tuta. Go home, have a good nap, boy.’

‘I said no, you’re coming with me. Alex, take his hand,’ Tuta told me.

Apo didn’t need more asking, but Tuta had a problem walking. I stood at one side, while Apo supported him for the other. We set off.

The restaurant Mayakovski was in a two-storey building. From the outside it looked like an old castle with a stone wall, complete with battlements. Two security guards were standing at the gate. When they saw Tuta and me, they smiled and opened the door for us.

We walked into the ground floor hall and Tuta roared at the waiters:

‘Dad’s coming with his buddies! Get the best of everything!’

They rushed back into the kitchen and in several minutes the table was laid out, loaded with plenty of food.

‘Dad’s gonna kill you,’ I whispered to Tuta, but he just waved me away.

We were served white wine, but it didn’t appeal to Tuta. He went into the cellar and brought back two jars of red wine.

He couldn’t drink anymore. Just couldn’t swallow more. Apo, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy it. He closed his eyes as he sipped the wine, savouring every drop. Then he kept some in his mouth, without swallowing, leaned back on his chair and let out a sigh of pleasure.

‘Apo, we are going to sing now,’ Tuta mumbled.

*Aprasion Merkviladze
Thought he was immortal;
He was shot twenty times,
Thought they were grains of rye;
Russian-Kossaks’ attack he
Thought was a swarm of flies;
Blood sprouting from his chest
He thought was spring water;*

*His mother's bitter tears on his grave
He thought was a spring rain...*

Apo was singing and though Tuta didn't know the words, he sang along, not always following him. Soon Apo taught him the lyrics and they roared together.

'Tell me more about Aprasion.'

'He had two sisters, Alexandra and, what's her name, oh, yeah, Minadora. They too hid in the woods after Aprasion was killed.'

'How was he killed?'

'His host betrayed him. The police shot at him, wounding his friend. Aprasion didn't abandon him, so he couldn't escape. Books were found in his bag, *Capital, The Class Struggle in France* and some by Plekhanov. Also, a blood-stained will in which he asked his buddies not to become highwaymen. Also, he had a list of all robberies and those responsible for them. He wanted to pass it to the court.'

'Wait a minute, Apo. Didn't you say he was an outlaw?'

'Listen, boy. They were revolutionaries, taking money from the government. They called it expropriation, and Aprasion was a pro in that, but some of his buddies robbed people as well.'

Suddenly Dad appeared in the hall.

'Get out of here, you and your hobo!' he yelled at Tuta.

Tuta gave him a mocking look.

'Won't you have a drink with us?'

'Move, now!'

'Get lost!'

Dad grabbed Tuta by the collar, lifting him off the chair.

'We're going. I'm sorry,' Apo's voice was quivering.

'Out, now!' Now Dad yelled at him.

'Don't hit the boy.'

Apo rose to his feet, patted me on the shoulder and headed for the door.

* * *

The next day Tuta gathered all the drunkards of the neighbourhood. Took along some Gipsy kids, a stray dog too. Said it was his birthday and wanted to invite everyone to a big party. He brought this mismatched army to the Mayakovski restaurant and ordered yet another feast. He sang about Aprasion Merkviladze and taught the song to others. They partied till midnight. That day Dad wasn't in town, so no one could stop him. But the following day Dad was told everything.

Tuta ran away from home.

The Third Escape

'Want a joint?'

'No.'

'Why? You're big enough.'

'It's disgusting.'

'No, it's flowers.'

'You mustn't smoke. You're going to kill yourself. You're overdoing with it.'

'It's useless. Doesn't work.'

'You're smoking so much, nothing works for you.'

'Want to hear a story?'

'Are you nuts? I'm not a child anymore.'

'You are. Come here, lie down and listen.'

'Get off me. I want no story. Leave me alone.'

'Please, I want to tell you one.'

'What story? Is that what you meant when you said you wanted to talk?'

'Please, let me tell it.'

'OK, shoot.'

'Once upon a time there were a mole and a water rat. One day the mole asked the water rat to teach him to swim.'

'Then?'

'The water rat was a true water rat, so he agreed. Have you brushed your teeth?'

'I have, after eating rice. Go on.'

'They went to the beach. The rat took the mole in his arms and tried to teach him to swim, but the mole was afraid.'

'Yeah.'

'They came out of the water, smoked a cigarette each, then, holding hands, went into the water again.'

'Then?'

'The mole would take a dip or two, then run back to the dry land. I've made a mistake.'

'Go on.'

'It was the mole that taught the rat to swim and he wanted to learn because he was a water rat.'

'Yeah.'

'Anyway, the rat would go into the water and immediately run back to the beach.'

'Yeah.'

'Then the mole said he would go into the water, swim around, while the rat was to watch him and learn how to do it. The mole waded deep and then began to swim. It swam and swam around. Then the rat told him to get out because he couldn't learn how to swim anyway. The mole refused, saying the rat should watch to learn, so he went on swimming.'

Suddenly, it started to rain and the rat ran home. The next day the rat opened the window – they lived quite near the water – and saw that the mole was still swimming.’

‘Then?’

‘The rat went to the water and called out to the mole to get out. The mole refused, saying he should keep watching, learn and try to swim himself. Time passed, the rat grew up, even started to work. He forgot about the mole.’

‘Did he learn to swim?’

‘Once he happened to be near the water and he saw the mole still swimming. He was quite far from the beach. The mole saw the rat and called out to keep watching to learn how to swim.’

‘Go on.’

‘In short, the rat decided the mole was quite insane to spend so many years in the sea.’

‘It wasn’t nuts.’

‘In the meanwhile, seaweeds began to grow on the mole, but he kept swimming. He hoped the rat would see him swim and learn how to do it.’

‘Then?’

‘The water rat thought the mole was raving mad, so he mainly befriended animals with more stable and reliable character. He didn’t move out of the town and, from time to time, came to the beach to watch the mole swimming. The seagulls took pity of the mole. They told him not to swim nonstop because no one was watching him anyway. But the mole replied that the water rat could look his way any time and that it was his duty to teach him to swim.’

‘And?’

‘Once the rat came to the water and couldn’t see the mole.’

‘Did it die?’

‘The rat didn’t want to think so, but that was the only idea he had.’

‘Go on.’

‘Then he went into the water, closed his eyes and imagined the mole. At first, he swallowed a lot of water, but little by little he felt he wasn’t sinking anymore.’

‘What about the mole? His story isn’t finished. Do we know what happened to him?’

‘No, we don’t.’

‘Are you going tomorrow?’

‘I am.’

* * *

We went to Kutaisi to get some weed. Tuta is an utterly impractical guy, otherwise he’d have found lots of places to grow it in Mayakovski.

He had planted it many times. And took good care of it. Called them flowers and talked to them. Poured milk over them, but failed to grow the seeds into saplings. Some seeds just didn’t grow, others would show stalks but quickly wither. One summer he put seeds in

small plastic cups with the hope of replanting the saplings when they were stronger. What he did was to place a small fish at the bottom, put soil on top and then a seed. It all ended when the smell of rotting fish coming from the basement became unbearable and Mum threw them away.

He did have a plant or two for himself and that catered for his needs. It could last him till the end of autumn at most, so in March he had nothing to smoke. That's when he used to get restless.

Had he been friendly with the lads in the neighbourhood, he wouldn't feel shortage because they always had enough. By now you are aware of Tuta's ways, so not surprisingly nobody gave him any weed.

In Kutaisi we went up and down, all sorts of places. He saw some acquaintances but they all refused to share. Tuta was ready to pay for it – he had a bit of money put aside for it. But he could find nothing.

Then he said he wanted a pair of trousers, so we went to the shopping area of the city.

The place with lots of little shops was called 'the Gypsies', but there wasn't a single gypsy in the one we went into. It proved difficult to find a pair that would fit Tuta. Most of them were too large around his waist. Smaller sizes hardly reached his ankles. Finally, he found something. It wasn't ideal but he was fed up with trying them on, so he left the shop buying a pair that was somewhat short.

At School No. 1 we passed the Mayakovski statue. Tuta spread his arms and recited one of his poems, at the top of his voice:

*У меня в душе ни одного седого волоса,
и старческой нежности нет в ней!
Мир огромив мощью голоса,
иду — красивый,
двадцатидвухлетний.⁵*

'That was cool, damn it,' lads sitting at the foot of the statue cheered Tuta's performance.

We walked around for quite a long time and finally came to the place where Lenin's monument used to be. Now there is David the Builder's statue in the square. We took a bus to the station.

The seats in the bus faced each other. A short, chubby boy sat opposite us. He had a kind of soiled jacket on. He looked at me a couple of times, but quickly averted his eyes.

⁵ "I have not a single grey hair in my soul,
Neither a trace of old-age tenderness!
Deafening the world with the might of my voice,
I come, handsome,
Twenty-two-year old."
(extract from Mayakovski poem "A Cloud in Trousers" / "Облако в штанах")

Tuta seemed exhausted, sitting without uttering a word. Suddenly he rose and pulled the hair back from the boy's forehead, as if he were a little child. Then he gently put his hand on the boy's forehead.

At first, the boy stared at him in disbelief, but then he stirred, pushed Tuta's hand away and yelled:

'Fuck off, you pederast!'

Tuta staggered and fell down. The boy continued to swear at him. Half of the passengers laughed, but the other half thought Tuta was trying to fondle the boy and joined him in the verbal abuse. I found myself in the most miserable state. Nothing connected to Tuta would have surprised me, but I could never imagine anything like this. I grabbed his wrist and pulled him towards the door. Holding hands, we must have looked like a gay couple. I nearly died of embarrassment. I tugged at his jacket and dragged him out of the bus.

'Okay, enough,' Tuta said and patted his pockets looking for his cigarettes. He found them, lit one and began to laugh.

'What the fuck was that? Now you're a pederast?'

'Come off.'

'That was fucking stupid, do you know that?'

'Sit down and have a fag.'

I kept pacing, swearing at him.

'Listen, Alex, I was thinking about something of my own, then I saw him, so miserable ...'

'And decided to entertain him, ha?'

'Shut up and listen if you want to know ...'

'Damn it, now you're sulking, right?'

'Did you notice how dejected he looked? His face was so sad. He might be in love and she doesn't even notice him. He might not have friends. I was looking at him, trying to imagine how I'd help him if he were my pal. I'd urge him to lose some weight and, more importantly, if he got rid of that awful fringe. He'd be an ordinary boy, some girl would fall for him and he'd be happy. He had beautiful blue eyes, but you couldn't see them because of that terrible fringe. Suddenly, I felt I couldn't take it anymore. I thought all his misfortunes were caused by that bloody fringe, also, I wanted to see his eyes. I just did it, without thinking. I know it was pretty daft to touch him. I should've talked to him first, explained things. But I just followed my instincts.'

'Hey, are you gay by any chance?'

'Bugger off, you don't understand anything.'

Kisho

When we heard that Kisho had driven the police car into the Khani River, Tuta got so excited nothing could calm him down.

‘Up theirs! Good job!’ he exclaimed and hit my shoulder so hard that he nearly broke my spine. He wanted to guess what had infuriated to such an extent the ever docile Kisho, who used to roam the streets on his own. He was absolutely harmless, didn’t even drink.

‘They must have stopped him in the street, and laughed at him, as they usually do, and he couldn’t bear it anymore,’ Tuta thought aloud.

But Kisho’s case wasn’t that straightforward. As the neighbours said, first he was badly beaten by the police, then taken to the detention station and later moved to the psychiatric clinic in Khoni.

Kisho lives across the street from us. As long as I remember myself, he’s always been slightly out of his mind. In our town there are several theories how and why he lost his mind. One says it was love. According to another, it was the civil war.

Tuta kept worrying about Kisho for days, regretting he never had a chance of getting to know him better.

It’s a mystery how exactly he could have done that because you couldn’t understand anything Kisho said. He used to walk around sweating, quietly and deliberately.

Following the liturgical principle, he would start with the government and the army, then move on to neighbours and relatives and finish with himself. However, he never fought anyone or showed aggression towards anyone.

Kids used to film him with their iPhones, which made him extremely popular on the net for some time, but soon he was forgotten.

He was released from the psychiatric clinic in two months. Tuta immediately got hold of him, treating him for a lavish dinner. When drunk, Kisho seemed saner than my brother.

He had a glass of vodka in his hand, was wiping sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, and pronounced lengthy monologues.

‘At this stage of the struggle, the opposition that is solely based on common sense and logic is only sustaining the system, legalizing oppression even further. What we need is a strategy based on absolutely irrational ideas, the executors of which are doomed to failure and will surely be marginalized. The ships of madmen that go sailing into the open seas are doomed. They will surely sink but will guide other sailors, who will move forward in the wake of the madmen’s ships that have perished.’

Kisho felt so warm, he turned the salad plate upside down and put his cheek on its cold surface.

Tuta couldn’t keep calm and throwing bunch of questions at him. He was curious why Kisho threw Police car in Khanistskhali river. He was suggesting the presumable versions himself why could Kisho be so mad at Police.

Kisho was not going to explain anything but Tuta would not give him a break.

“I wanted to swim!” – he eventually shouted. Tuta started laughing; he could not get what he was talking about. Laughter fixed Kisho’s mood and went into conversation;

“Khanistskali was dried and I wanted to dam it for a proper swimming. It was like a puddle of piss.”

“So?”

“So the Militia car was nearby, I pushed it into the river. Car blocked the stream and dammed the water. I just needed to wait but had no time, those jerks cuffed me immediately”