

Extract from Archil Kikodze *The Lizard on the Gravestone*

translated by Donald Rayfield

Years later, while waiting for a delayed flight at Tbilisi airport, Frau Wolber told me about her first tryst with Gigo: she burst into tears...

‘He came with flowers and a bottle of expensive wine; he had no luggage, and his eyes were nervously darting from side to side. He was a stranger in Berlin, amazed by everything and afraid of everything. The 1990s were good years. You breathed a different air in Berlin. I asked him straight out, “Do you have so much money? Tell me, do you have so much money that you can bring me a bouquet as big as that?!” He was embarrassed. “I’m from the Caucasus,” he said, “from Georgia...” as if that would explain his behaviour. I had no idea about that country. I knew of Shevardnadze, but nothing else. I had visitors at the time. Friends, men — one was my ex together with his friend, and the reason I’d invited them was to give Gigo the once-over, to see whether he was a danger to me, or not. Even if he stayed for just one night, might he be going to cut my throat? I didn’t want to stay alone with him for the very first evening. I was wary. I had no idea who he was. He didn’t like meeting them. He sulked. Then he made as if to leave. I called him back at the door. ‘Where are you going, you idiot? They’ll be leaving soon. They brought some sushi. Have you ever tried sushi?’ — ‘Yes,’ he said, “I have.” But he was lying. This was the first time he’d eaten it and he looked ridiculous when held the sticks in his big fat fingers, the way people hold a paint brush. But he had a butcher’s hands, not a painter’s. I told him this once and he took offence.

‘Then my guests left and we were alone together. We sat in the kitchen. He tried to be attentive. I asked him, “Do you want sex?” He was so taken aback that I burst out laughing. He lost his temper and went for me. “Good man, you know how to kiss... Follow me...” I took him

into the bathroom. I turned on the tap and told him to have a bath. I opened a drawer and gave him an unopened toothbrush pack. He looked furtively at the drawer and saw that I had a lot more similar cheap toothbrushes. And this arrogant schmuck became jealous... That made me want to laugh even more. Imagine, it was the first half of the 1990s, I was still a young woman, the wall had just been pulled down. Berlin was celebrating, and this little man who'd come from nowhere actually dared to be jealous of me. Who was he, anyway? Where was he from? Your country had only just appeared on the map. I'd brought into my house a man I'd only met the day before, and instead of thanks... Then he had a bath. I stood there and watched. I quite liked the sight, although I wouldn't have thought that he would have lasted all that long in my life. And why should he have?! He didn't intend to, either, he took off the next morning, sneaked off and vanished, as if he had had no contact whatsoever. I missed him, I like sex with him. His jealous suspicions were something unusual and childlike, but very alien. I missed him and one month later he came like a beaten dog and rang my bell from street level. I was pleased.

'The first thing he did was to throw my one-night-stand toothbrushes into the rubbish bin and drink all the wine — my wine because he didn't have the money to buy any more. Or to buy flowers, or cigarettes. I sat there wondering why I was letting him do all this. I had absolutely no need for an impoverished artist or for love. Berlin is full of impoverished artists, the universe is full of them. I loathe impoverished artists, impoverished and ungrateful artists!

““Would you like to talk?””

“Wie bitte? What do you have in mind?””

'Did he like talking? When he was living in Berlin, did he always want to talk?'

'What about?'

‘I don’t know... About himself, about your surroundings, about you?..’

‘I don’t know what you’re asking me about, but Gigo was about as talkative as a dead man, he never asked me what my day was like, how the gallery was doing, and he didn’t even say much about himself... and as for coffee, I will pay for my coffee myself. You brought me to the airport, I didn’t ask for it. “I could have come by taxi, but I’m grateful.” —“You should know that I have enough money to pay for a coffee when I’m invited, and I don’t believe in any of this show-off gentlemanly behaviour you exhibit.”’

‘Well then, you didn’t talk?’

‘Almost never, only if he had drunk a lot and that wasn’t talking, it was muttering, blah-blah-blah, which I let run over me. I don’t like drunks, and I found Gigo especially irritating when drunk.’

‘Well, looking at you, you two are like little children — time you got married... if you trust me, if you’ll allow it, I’ll give you a piece of advice... if you get married to a woman, no, what do I mean... if you fuck your wife, don’t turn over straight away to face the wall and don’t go to sleep... talk to her!’

Gigo rang me from Berlin and told me a really intricate story which I had trouble making sense of. He was dragged into it and meant to involve me, too. I was supposed to accompany him on his travels. First he slyly asked me if I rode horses... ‘Oh no, what do I know about horses, Gigo? The only thing I ride is the office chair.’ He didn’t laugh. ‘I’ll choose you the very quietest horse,’ he promised, and then told me his story. I listened to him and I regretfully pondered the days of leave that had been accumulated that I meant to spend with my girlfriend Alde. But, speaking from Berlin, Gigo almost seemed to be present, as if he had never even gone away anywhere, as if he hadn’t spent years in exile... He was asking me to support him. His cousin in the country had turned on the electricity switch, while his a neighbour had climbed a pole to fix a cable that had been torn down by the wind. Had that happened in Phkhovi?

Speaking from Berlin, Gigo laughed: 'Tell me then, where would we find electric current in the mountains?' No, the accident happened in the valley, in an enormous Kartli village where for over fifty years several highland families had lived alongside the valley people: you wouldn't want any electrocuted man to be someone from Phkhovi and yet he was. But the victim didn't have any brothers who would be obliged to take revenge. The 'murdered man' and his unwitting killer were neighbours both in the valley and in the mountains. The matter, however, was subject to mountain rules. By valley rules and by official law, Gigo's cousin was in the clear: the main thing now was to get a reconciliation under mountain law. This had to be done in the mountains and the closest male relative, Gigo, had to go to the shrine with a prayer offering. He had to slaughter an ox. When I hear this sort of thing over the phone, it makes me dizzy, but I am only too aware that I will come along too... the reason we were going on horseback seemed to be so that nothing happened on the journey, so that we could avoid encountering the victim's kith and kin.

I couldn't believe what I was listening to: could we really not go up there by car, perform the rituals and then go home again? Was it really possible for us to meet with an accident on the way there? I promised that I'd accompany him, but I still took a dubious view of this enterprise. The planned expedition on horseback, using a safe route to Gigo's shrine, was financed by Gigo and might well have been intended as a ride in the mountains for himself, as a reminder of something Gigo never forgot: who he was and where he came from.

We set off on horseback on an almost vertical climb, because this was a route that almost nobody used any more; we were following paths barely visible and you could hardly make out our route or the hoof prints of our horses on the moraine. There were four of us, myself and three men of the accursed clan, one of whom was a child, another an old man and the third was Gigo.

He had come from Berlin to carry out an ancient customary ritual, but riding these paths, physically exhausted, with aching muscles, drunk to the point of losing consciousness, dying and then re-animated, it often seemed to me that this was all a farce. I was being fooled, Gigo was being fooled by his elderly uncle Aleksí and his great-nephew Ghvtiso, who had brought the horses down from Phkhovi to meet us, had shod them as we watched, had packed our baggage neatly into the saddle-bags, given us the cleverest horses, after which I got into the saddle and set off: it was no easy ride, it was not the fun joy-ride I had imagined. There really was a risk of misadventure — on the very first day I was struck by a downpour, by hail and a real storm. The horses were startled and quivering, only just missed by a bolt of lightning; then came someone's, I think uncle Aleksí's, shriek: 'Dismount!' By the time that first day was over, my body was so tired that I lost all feeling, and it was all I could do to get my body to a shepherd's hut where we were to spend the night. Once there, Gigo got drunk and for the first time I heard him lecturing the shepherds. For the first time I heard him lecturing anybody: after doing "it" don't just go to sleep — first talk to your wives.

The next morning, warming myself in the sun, I felt that the whole business had been a ploy acted out by Gigo to lure himself to his homeland and to free himself from Frau Wolber's clutches. Would we really meet anyone when we finally got there? And if anyone did meet us, maybe he would be a friend rather than an enemy? Perhaps there'd be a banquet waiting for us at the end of our journey and there would be a customary bride, her eyes modestly cast down, waiting for us. Someone that Gigo would have to take to talking, frequently and at length...

We mounted our horses, continued our journey and I had been persuading myself that blood vengeance really did exist. At one point I believed that I imagined that at every bend in the path

there was an enemy lurking in the rhododendron bushes who would slaughter the lot of us and whose race I would be cursing as I died...

And on the way I listened to more stories — countless stories...

After all, we were travelling into the past and, perhaps, we would never return to the present...

And here was the little river, which was barely deep enough to reach the horses' knees, but was frightening to fall into. When the water was high, the wife of a relative of Gigo had tried to cross it on horseback. She had two small boys clinging to the saddlebags on either side: the water carried away both of these boys who were meant to be the family' posterity. Both of them perished momentarily as they forded the water...

'Our family is cursed, uncle, cursed!' Enfeebled by sitting about in Frau Wolber's gallery, Gigo nevertheless had a physical memory of horses that stemmed from his childhood, the body never forgets anything and that was why he could keep his body in the saddle more bravely than I did. There was a challenge in his eyes and I had the impression that he was putting on an act to impress the man he had invited to watch him on this journey... The closer we got to his homeland, the more moody and distant he became: this was no longer the Gigo who had rung me from Berlin asking me not to make him go on his own. He had an expression best suited to a young lad emboldened by fate and he seemed to be trying to make me feel that I was an outsider in these mountains, that I was different and, however hard I tried, I would never be able to fit in with these surroundings.

The husband of the woman who had lost two children forbid her to weep: that was how he punished her. The mother took the accordion off the wall and played it again and again, she moaned and she moaned, for days and nights she dragged sounds from the accordion and turned the tears that had accumulated in her heart into the saddest of tunes, a melody which everyone in those mountains knows.

However, almost nobody now lives in these mountains...

For four and a half days we rode and we spent four nights in shepherds' huts. The shepherds enjoyed our visits, we were interesting to them, because news of our journey had come ahead of us and in these almost uninhabited mountains everyone knew who we were and where we were headed for as we followed these paths, that were hidden from and forgotten by everybody.

The Caucasus opened up before me and let me, an uncouth rider, enter.

'Wake up! Wake up immediately!' Early in the morning an elderly woman woke up Sanata, 'You've slept long enough, girl, open your eyes!' The woman, forgotten by death and by her kinsfolk, sitting in full sun in front of the house, was telling us the story of an awakening, and again I had the illusion that reality was far away from her and us. The woman was announcing danger, that much she grasped that she would not appear otherwise, she opened an eye, stood up, looked out of the window: policemen and border guards were already coming up the village slope, even though her house was the only one left inhabited, all on its own. She just had time to throw the machine gun, which was hidden under a mattress, and a rifle from a back window into the tall nettles; then she sat on the mattress again, probably with the same otherworldly expression on her face, just as she was now sitting in the full sun, while she was telling us this

story. It was her husband's rifle, her son's machine gun. The police couldn't find anything, they didn't search very hard, they had their orders and they came up to rummage about. Before they left, the chief border guard told her so that nobody else heard, 'Your son has killed a man, and we suspect he is heading here, he's got nowhere else to go.' He couldn't make her listen, and he shouted at her, 'Your son killed a man!' This officer - a distant relative of Sanata's husband who had died many years earlier ought to have been rewarded as a bringer of good news, and the old woman would now be able to see her miscreant invisible son, she would not be too late and would see him still alive. Sanata was waiting, and the lad would get there sooner or later. He now had nowhere else to go. Perhaps he was already here, but hadn't appeared yet because he was being cautious, spying out the area, perhaps he could see us, and was lurking somewhere nearby so that he could hear what we were saying. The unmown grass was easily high enough to hide a weapon, a human being and what remained of the village.

Then she asked us to remind her who we were, and Gigo explained straight away who we were and whose family we belonged to. She recalled and was overjoyed because Gigo's grandfather had been the man who announces the wedding gifts at her wedding. A big, powerful man, he had walked, doffing his hat, among the drunken wedding guests and collected the money for the bride and groom. 'A contribution, you decent people, a contribution! Sanata has her eyes shut and is hidden deep in some shelter that we cannot reach.' The horses were grazing, we were standing there and waiting to see when she would get back to us after the sound of mandolin and accordion, the dancing on tip-toe, the yelling and the revolver shots fired at the ceiling. 'A contribution, decent people!' This call was a bridge to the other world, from which there is no quick turning back... 'A contribution! a contribution!' If it isn't repeated very frequently, this world with its noises, faces and images will fade away as if it had never existed.

In the evening, by the shepherds' hut, we were once more greeted by the barking of the sheep dogs. Covered in the haze behind us, again we freed the horses of their saddles and took from our baggage packs the cigarettes and vodka we intended as presents. We had more drink than we could count, there was a fire burning in the hut; over the fire a mutton stew was being heated up. The shepherds all looked alike, so that I began to wonder if our convoy wasn't moving in a circle. Our hosts knew uncle Aleksi, they knew Gigo and who he was — a man from a distant country, spoiled by the good life, who had come back from Frau Wolber's insatiable clutches to carry out the rites of his forefathers in his native mountains. Everything was fine until the moment when a drunken guest looked all around and, as if suddenly turning on the hosts, asks, 'Lads, are you married or are you single men?' Uncle Aleksi couldn't take this and went off to sleep. I was thinking that this was to certain to end with us being beaten up, and we'd deserve it. Gigo didn't care at all, because his evening sermon had turned into a ritual, a mania. Was everything really so bad in Europe, lads, those people know a few things we could learn from... talk to your wives! Who did he talk to himself, I wonder? Frau Wolber? Or the naked and childishly innocent whores of the *Artemis* brothel! Don't go to sleep, talk a bit after doing it Don't turn to face the wall straight away...

He talks to almost any European we encounter, the tourist season in the mountains is now beginning; sporadically we come across back-packing Europeans, in several places we had to cross the roads and we saw a couple with whom Gigo was able to speak in German, and I in English. I was impatient and took a picture of the woman: she had grey hair and wore a crown plaited from flowers on her head. She had a devilish expression in her eyes that was quite inappropriate for her age. Looking past my lens, she was watching with infatuated eyes her husband, who was talking with Gigo.

The woman was suffering from dementia. In five minutes she would forget everything that had been exciting her. She could remember her husband. She was as much in love with him as she had been in her youth, she was happy every moment that he was by her side: such a great emotional attachment is both touching and unbearable for a man. She couldn't remember her children. Every time they were mentioned, she was amazed that she had children and grandchildren. I am afraid, knowing that she would one day come to forget me as well... Together with the fit husband I was looking at Isolda (that was the wife's name). After 1945, nobody was giving such names in our country. The man seemed to be apologizing to me, while Isolda was making a new crown and putting it on the head of my white horse... 'and before it happens, what I am most afraid of, we came here and we always wanted to see the Caucasus, Isolda just loves this region... she likes it every time...'

The sky was clouding over, it was about to rain, uncle Aleksii and Ghvtiso were urging us to hurry. I had never ever mounted my horse so easily and youthfully: the horse was four years old when it was gelded, which made it very quiet, but that summer, Ghvtiso informed me, it had got involved in a fight with mares, pursuing them and trying to mate. I'd never before handled the bridle in such a masterful way. I did this for her and for the man she loved. Once I turned the horse round and waved to them. She, wearing her crown, waved back in reply. So, she recognizes me, she remembers me, but very soon the mist swallows us and she'll forget us. I felt I was seeing through her eye the disappearance on horseback of myself and my fellow-travellers, and a little later she must have just have been able to hear through the mist the clatter of horseshoes on the stony ground...

A small aspen-tree that had fallen in the forest was blocking our path. Uncle Aleksii reached for the saddle-bag attached to his bridle and took out a hatchet and cut the aspen free, so that it

could be dragged off the path. He wouldn't let anyone else do it, it was his axe, part of his supplies, so it was his job to do the cutting. I stood behind him, soaked by the rain, holding the bridles of both our horses. I watched his back, the old man was working away as frantically as a woodpecker. All you could hear in the forest was the thump of the axe, and I felt good, I hadn't felt so good for a long time. Dementia, dement-i-i-ia, that weighty word enveloped the forest like a fog, leaving no space for anything else. Then the tree breaks with a crackle and I could feel in my hands how the horses shivered when they heard the sound.

Everything comes to an end. The path was clear again.

More travelling and more shrines, family, clan and parish towers, either ruined or on the verge of ruin, with stone men erected to mark truces, slabs of slate meant as monuments anywhere where someone had died suddenly, had been killed in a blood feud, had perished in a landslide or had perished, frozen to death, in a blizzard. Stones everywhere, which seemed to be immortal and therefore served to remind a human being of the memories he would leave. Stone, as a reminder and as iron... at the sites of more recent tragedies slabs had been stuck onto iron rods, and the inscribed with the name, surname and dates of birth and death of the deceased or the murder victim, although these monuments looked rather wretched, when compared with the stone. I had the feeling that inscriptions and, even more so, dating, didn't fit in with the surroundings, that they diminished them, that they turned a myth into reality. I didn't know what Gigo, who had seen it all, felt. He was becoming gloomier by day, as we got nearer to our goal: he became all the grimmer until we got through our next overnight stay and were subjected to another sermon. But at the last shepherds' hut, from where we had only about two hours' journey to reach our goal, we had a different sort of reception, even though they didn't need any introduction to know who we were and where we were headed. Nobody was refusing us hospitality, and mutton stew,

food for real men, was sizzling over the fire, but the oldest shepherd is known to be a bitter drunk; furthermore, he was a friend of the man who had tried to restore the electricity. 'He was like a brother to me,' he said. After a few glasses his eyes glazed over and he spoke, and drank, offering, as host, toasts to the memory of everyone who had died, then separately just to his friend. He got drunk easily and you could tell by the other hosts that his drunkenness was no cause for joy. The shepherds asked uncle Aleksi, who was the oldest man there, to tell them some old story. He was prepared to do so, but the rowdy troublemaker interrupted him, saying 'I'll tell my grandfather's story,' and then said whose grandchild he was. Uncle Aleksi lowered his gaze to signify that this person really did deserve to be mentioned by other men around the fireside.

Our host began his tale, and told it in such a way that I instantly understood that this unfinished story had rebounded on himself, just like a wine pot stirred with a wooden stirring stick while people get drunk on the fumes of the grape brandy that are stirred up. He was drunk on this story, he was in thrall to it. He was telling the story at night about the pillar-like ghost of his grandfather against the background of the peaks, which shone white with snow, and of a star-studded sky and a full moon. He told the story so that I could feel the stinging cold of a mountain autumn, while I could see his father's ghost in the frosted fescue-grass. This ghost was infinite, he was coming towards us and the grandson, too, was eternally subject to the ghost. The grandfather was standing like a stone statue at the door, which he was about to break down with a kick. The other side of the door was the darkness of hell, which would for an instant be lit up by striking a match, and then there would only be blood shed for blood. He was clutching a dagger... his heart was about to leap out, his breathing was no doubt as fast as that of the man telling this decades-old story, a man whose ancestor was about to break into a hut from which he doesn't know if he will escape alive. As well as the dagger, he was holding a match which he

was ready to strike. The door is about to be kicked down, the match to be struck, and then just the sharp steel weapon to be twisted in the blood enemies' hearts and bellies.

I shall come in and stab...

He stood by the door, getting ready. Only concerned that the matchbox in his quivering hand didn't rattle. His thumping heart didn't give him out. He would break in, strike, and throw the lit match into the darkness. The hissing herald of death would fly with a buzz into the deepest part of the hut and in just one instant snatch the sleeping bodies, wrapped in their felt cloaks, off to hell. He had just to be quick about it and, before intervening with his dagger, commit to memory where they all lay. There would be no time to reach out for the weapons that had been laid by the side of the brave young men lying on the floor, they wouldn't be able to work out what was happening to them, whether it was a dream, or reality, a flame from the fire fading in the air before going out. In that instant of illumination, had they seen a flesh-and-blood human being in the smashed aperture of the door, or had the wrath of God broken out over them?