

The Southern Elephant

by Archil Kikodze

excerpt

Armed with long poles, the policemen are busy at the Ortachala¹ Hydro Station. It seems they are the only ones on this sunny wintry morning who have something to do. They push as hard as they can, nearly succeed in moving the corpse. They aren't trying to get the body out of the water. They just want to push it hard enough to budge it. We stare at the scene with gaping mouths. We don't understand what's going on. Only later, Tazo, loyal to his ways, finds out the story behind the scene we witnessed. But that morning, on our way from visiting prostitutes, we were dumbly watching the policemen's futile efforts. We had spent the night in a house lost in the old quarter of Kharpukhi and now, looking at the curdled waters at the hydro station, we would have given anything to erase our memories, to forget all we'd seen ... Asking around in the winding, narrow streets of Kharpukhi, we eventually find the brothel in the most inappropriate house and knock on the glass gallery, referring to an acquaintance of Tazo's acquaintance. Stepping from the dark street, we momentarily freeze in the hall, long enough to get our eyes used to the light inside. The surrounding is a sight indeed ... Dents on the ceiling and walls left by different caliber bullets, gruff stares from the corners, cast by the eyes that don't like anyone ... As if we are characters of a western having just blundered into the worst town in the world. 'They don't like strangers, do they?' God bless the scriptwriters of the old movie dialogues.

¹ Ortachala, Kharpukhi, Isani and Samgori are historical parts of Tbilisi, capital of Georgia.

'They like no one.' It's obvious that we won't find love her. On the balcony, a generator roars out of rhythm ... We aren't looking for trouble, we are unarmed ... Tazo is fiddling with his hat, the one he never goes without. Under his warm coat he has his only sweater he has been wearing for the last ten years. It's a shapeless blue one, knitted from thick wool, with a red diagonal strip in front ... He squints at the light bulb, then smiles at the surroundings for no apparent reason. He just can't help it – his smile is always kind of inappropriate. Now it's clear for everyone that we aren't going to shoot or threaten anyone with a gun, and suddenly it becomes interesting. Are you brothers? A speck of interest appears in their lazy eyes ... No, we're not ... We aren't going to hit them either during sex or later, when we get sober and will wish to puke – not so much at them, but at ourselves. What's more, Tazo might have enough strength to smile at them in the morning ... Then we'll leave ... Go down the cobbled slope without talking to each other, in silence, cross the deserted square without a single car, won't even notice the valiant Petre Bagrationi brandishing his sword, in the same way as we never pay attention to other mounted historical heroes across the city. We'll get on the Ortachala dyke and share the only cigarette. We don't have enough to buy the filter ones, but will get some without filters later on, as soon as little kiosks in our respective blocks open. But it's a long walk to the familiar grounds ... In the meanwhile, we want to cast the first and final glance at the city from this vantage point ... But why final? It's final for me, but surely Tazo came back. Otherwise he wouldn't have found out about the corpse ...

The stagnant Mtkvari with grassy banks and gulls ... The Isani policemen, ever so hungry for petty bribes, are trying to push the corpse. With the long poles, they are shoving it to the right, swearing and getting into each other's way. The dead man is floating on his back. He is wearing a colourless jacket, the hue of the river, and a pair of jeans, just like us. Hard to say if he was killed or has committed suicide, but it doesn't matter for the policemen anyway. Very soon Tazo will discover that it's a common thing, that the Ortachala hydro station is a haven for Tbilisi corpses: those

who jump of their own accord or thrown into the river, sooner or later gather at the dyke. Down the Mtkvari, in Samgori, the policemen have lots of long rods and poles prepared for the same purpose. 'You've got to act fast in this city' – depends who is smarter and adroit in shoving the dead bodies to the other side. In Samgori and in Isani the policemen work with gusto to prove who is smarter. But that winter morning, Isani was definitely faster, which means Samgori got a fresh homicide case, or possibly a suicide ...

Next to me, Tazo shivers. He might be thinking the same. The water's too cold ...

Suddenly, he starts telling about his dream. 'Don't tell me you were able to sleep last night.' He did and dreamt he was swimming in a vast stretch of water. He swims with strong, well-calculated strokes, heading for the horizon. He's got quite a distance to cover, so he saves his energy. The horizon seems too distant, practically unreachable for even such an expert swimmer as Tazo, but he persists, quite stubbornly. He doesn't really know why he is swimming or where to, but he feels there is something extremely important waiting for him ahead, or something vital is going to happen to him. Indeed, something appears against the dull horizon, pushing Tazo to keep going. He is exhausted but hasn't lost faith in his own strength even for a second. He is sure he will reach the end. His aim nears, consequently gets larger. It's an inscription. Tazo can't read it yet but he can clearly see that it is mounted on a huge metal construction, something similar to the old Soviet structures erected in the most improbable places, saying 'Forward to the bright future!' Or the enormous Hollywood Sign on Mount Lee. Tazo waves his hand in a vague gesture to describe the inscription that he nears after swimming tirelessly in the vast sea and now he can discern it. Apparently, that was his target ... The word 'cunt' covers the entire horizon as if it were a verdict and Tazo writes in the air with his hand, this time the letters being easily recognizable. There is no sea around us but I readily visualized the word written by Tazo hand hanging over our city, somewhere above the dammed up river and the old

quarters across it. Insane, isn't it? We stare at each other. He drags at what's left of my cigarette, shrugs his shoulders as if saying it's not his fault he dreamt such a weird dream. He fights back laughter. He flicks the butt into the river and we even hear a brief hiss as it hits the water and then we burst into laughter. We just can't stop. The Isani policemen, who have nearly managed to shove the body into the Samgori jurisdiction, stop and look at us, trying to guess if we have found their efforts comical. Oh, no, not at all! Whatever you're doing this morning, no doubt it's for the good of our city and the whole country. We laugh our heads off. They give up on us having their own problems. Still laughing, we leave the dyke. We've got to walk all the way to our homes and the kiosks where we can get cigarettes without filters on credit ...

I open my eyes. The ice hasn't melted in the glass yet. I must have nodded off. The computer screen shows the same picture: somewhere in the Near East, Nelly is patting a cat. I look at my watch. Nearly nine. My visitor will be any minute now. He hasn't been here for many years. Mum's funeral doesn't count. It was more out of duty, personal and social. But he called yesterday and somehow, awkwardly, with lots of pauses, finally said what he wanted to say. Even across the distance I felt he was afraid of being laughed at. Something that never occurred to me. I listened and agreed, as if it were an honour.

But nine in the morning is too early. Is it a date or a hangover breakfast?

My doorbell rings. Couldn't wait till nine. I go to open it, but halfway down the hall I suddenly think he mustn't see Nelly. I go back to the computer and close down the picture, then the whole album. The doorbell rings again – this time more persistently and somewhat impatiently. My daughter hasn't appeared in the chat for some time. It must be late there and most probably she's asleep. I leave the chat room, order the computer to go to sleep and head for the front door.

I hardly have time to look at him. Tazo doesn't step over the threshold – he jumps over it as if he's looking for a shelter from the rain. He moves inside, into the depths of the flat as if it were a sanctuary. His clamorous ringing hasn't been insolent at all – he was seeking asylum. He drops heavily into an armchair by my sofa and scrutinizes the book shelves as if it's his first time at my place.

'Were you asleep?'

'I nodded off. Was looking at the computer and dozed off. Actually, I woke up quite early ...'

He takes a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lights one. His manner hasn't changed: he smokes with the greed of a teenager, a novice, with long drags – one, two, three and the fag's burned to the butt.

I also take my cigarette from the table and light it. He watches me impatiently. I can't enjoy mine, crush it out and get to my feet.

'Tazo, come with me, will you?'

We go into the bedroom. Zoia, my cleaner, hasn't been in. Usually, it's Zoia who changes my bedclothes. Come on, help me!

I had stripped away my own bedclothes earlier, before I dozed off at the computer. We are funny to watch. I shouldn't be thinking about it, but what we do is a movie ... Two men over forty are awkwardly changing bedclothes with dead serious faces, stuffing pillows into pillowcases. Do you want a thinner blanket? I don't think we'll be cold, it's quite warm already ... I don't believe even for a moment that Tazo doesn't appreciate the cinematographic value of the absurd scene. I can't help thinking that now, just like in the old times, we are going to look at each other and guess we're thinking the same. Then we'll have a good laugh ... But no – Tazo hasn't glanced at me even once. We've been working in silence. We're tired, but here you are, the bed's ready ...

I remember something. I go into the sitting-room, open a sideboard, take out a half-empty bottle of brandy and two glasses.

‘A glass or two has a great effect on me ... In this case ... You know what I mean, don’t you?’ I’m angry with myself because I realize I’m carefully choosing words when talking to Tazo.

He eyes the bottle, as if he doesn’t see it, as if he doesn’t understand what I’m saying.

‘Are you going out in that tracksuit?’

Tazo isn’t rude or impudent, and can never be such. He is just impatient to get me out. He is nervous and, I feel, he finds the whole situation highly embarrassing. I smile.

‘I’ll change in a second and will be gone.’

In the bedroom I change really quickly, like a soldier. I usually don’t need long. I shove my tracksuit into the wardrobe. I’ll change into the jogging shoes in the hall. I might need to walk quite a lot. Cigarettes, keys, phone in the pocket. What else?

In the sitting-room Tazo is looking at a photo behind the bookshelf glass. Bent low, he seems to be trying to remember something.

The photo is black and white, I believe taken by his dad and developed in their bathroom under the magic red light. It has been behind that glass since the times when we didn’t need to stoop to see it. The National Museum yard, with us standing against the skeleton of a prehistoric elephant. I’m wearing a jumper knitted by Mum. Both are groomed and in our Sunday best clothes. Probably ten at the time. In the background the elephant in a huge glass box hardly fits into the frame. But its front legs, tusks and part of its forehead are clearly visible. I even remember what the inscription was on the box. Here it is if you don’t believe me:

Archidoskodon Meridionalis – the southern elephant, found in Taribana Valley.

Tazo slips his hand behind the glass and takes out the photo, bringing it closer to his eyes. He squints and I think his eyesight is getting poorer. Might already need reading glasses.

'I always imagined Taribana Valley to be a mysterious place, with elephants roaming freely. But the other day I was at an exhibition and there was this photo – a bare field with a single tree. It was a strangely beautiful place. It said *Taribana Valley*. I wanted to buy the photo but it was already sold.'

'I've been to the valley,' Tazo replaces the photo. 'My office sent me to insure the harvest. Someone's wheat. Nothing special about the place ...'

Tazo has been to Taribana Valley. He insured someone's wheat crop. Time for me to go. Here, take the keys. Just in case ... When you're ready, call me and I'll come back. If you don't wait for me, leave them on the sideboard in the hall and shut the door ...

He nods and sees me to the front door. I put my jogging shoes on. And go down the stairs with a thud of a man who's got nothing to hide. Let the adulterers sneak furtively! I look up to wave him goodbye but he's already closed the door. Fine with me ...

Before stepping out into the street, I look at myself in Mediko's mirror. I haven't shaved but that's all right. Money, phone, keys ... Nothing left behind, no need to go back. Mediko's mirror tells me that besides a shave I badly need a haircut. I might get one if I plan my day properly. I smile – what planning am I talking about if I've got nothing to do? But even if I have to, I know all too well I won't do it. I don't even recall the time when I woke up or left home so early in the morning. Getting cigarettes and mineral water doesn't count. I mean leaving home properly, purposefully. I look at myself in Mediko's mirror once again, then one, two ... two and a half, three and I'm in the street.

The entrance is strewn with cigarette butts.

At nighttime our entrance becomes a refuge for young couples. The door doesn't lock. I know other similar entrances along the street with similarly broken locks, but ours is particularly popular. I believe it's the mirror that is largely responsible for it ... They can sit on the steps and see their reflections at the same time. The mirror is a witness to their caress and the proof that they have each other. They might even be sizing each

other up. Mediko's mirror has a shape of a vertically upturned enormous eye. A human eye isn't a perfect instrument. At close quarters, it can easily lose focus, so you start seeing the dear eyes in patches, or a blur of the necklace around the dear neck. At that point you can furtively glance at the mirror to steal a different angle and who knows, the mirror can show you something that will make you smile ...

The problem is they throw cigarette butts in the entrance.

I step into the sunshine. I cross the street and look at my house from the opposite pavement. No one is watching me from the windows. The curtains aren't moving. But is my flat really suitable for the first date? Tazo was so nervous I'm absolutely sure it's the first. He's got a job and salary, insures someone's harvest in Taribana Valley. He could easily afford a hotel room but still opted for my place. Preferred my humble digs to an alienated, impersonal king-size hotel bed, to relaxing on it, watching a French movie. After all these years he preferred a home-like atmosphere ... Apart from the photo behind the glass panel, what else is he going to find that will seem familiar to him? Books? I have several books on the floor by the bed. I wonder if he's going to have a look at them. Will he get interested in what I'm reading? What else ... A couple of paintings by Tengiz Mirzashvili on the walls, hanging there as a sign that mine, just like Tazo's house, is part of a city inside another city that the artist has left in abundance as selfless gifts ... Maybe the woman Tazo's waiting for is from the artist's city too. Loneliness is unbearable in both cities, isn't it? She is soon going to walk into my flat and look around timidly ... What else will meet her eyes? Another huge photo of a city, or rather of a settlement ... It's Mum, leaning on a walking-stick in the ditch that took years to dig in that archaeological site. She's looking determinately into the lens, refusing to accept that she had spent decades digging the monument that hadn't yielded anything valuable ... Also, a poster of my film, which I had no courage to ask Tazo to see, neither have I asked if he's seen it. What else? Innumerable snapshots of my daughter stuck to the fridge with magnets. I forgot to tell Tazo to look inside, but if he does, he'll find plenty of snacks

suitable for a single man ... On the other hand, he came with a plastic bag, which he stuffed between the armchair and the sofa. Apparently, he's brought something himself ...

Mediko comes out of our entrance and waves to me. I wave back from across the street. A casual meeting of neighbours in the morning. But she's going to her work while I've got no idea where I'm heading.

'Is everything all right?'

'Yes. I'm out for a walk.'

'Your face says something's up.'

'Not really. I just woke up very early and thought I'd have a walk.'

'Fancy walking in this direction?' She indicates towards the Republic Square.

I shake my head and suddenly I feel the urge to shout that Tazo's in my flat.

'Can we have a lock installed in our door? Look at the mass.'

Smiling, Mediko turns back.

'By *us* you mean me, right?'

I chuckle and raise my hand in farewell. I walk in the opposite direction, towards the Blue Monastery. From there I can walk straight into Vere Park and smoke a cigarette in peace and quiet.

Tazo's visitor will have no problem finding number 11 Kiacheli Street. A two-storey house, one entrance. He was bound to give her an additional hint. He must have mentioned the mirror in the entrance. The woman will surely look into it and I wish her to be satisfied with how she looks. Then she'll walk up the stairs. Tazo will hear her footsteps. It's impossible to go up on high heels without making a lot of noise. Reclining on the sofa, resting your head on your hands, you listen to rhythmic footsteps. You haven't thought of anything better for your head, body and limbs. Your heart is thumping loudly. The sound of footsteps stops at the door and an unbearably long pause follows – until there comes a knock or a doorbell and the temporarily halted heart starts beating again ...

A group of churchgoers leaving the morning mass at the Blue Monastery ask me to take their photo. I take their camera, step back and lean against the wall to fit them all into the picture. The owner of the camera runs to join the group in which the priest is the central figure. He freezes with his three fingers poised to make a sign of cross. Click. I check the screen. It's fine but I'll take another one. They assume somber expressions. The priest raises his hand again in an imitation of blessing. I click again. Have a look. I think it's fine ... The owner of the camera thanks me and I walk on.

There are two things that are impossible to capture on the screen: a realistic rendition of a love act and a prayer. I can't believe actors that are trying to convince me that they are making love wholeheartedly. Neither do I believe actors trying to convince me they are praying ...

That's what old bloke Orson Welles thought ... Now, where did that come from?

It's the dog owners' time in Vere Park. Soon others will flood it: children, nannies and ghosts. And in the evening loving couples will occupy every single bench. But mornings belong to dog owners. I like them. From time to time I also come here with the white Labrador, unleash him and watch him enjoy life with other dogs. They sniff each other, run around and feel happy. Together with the Lab, I become part of the dog company. Without the dog these people don't recognize me, but I know every one of them. Today, however, I can't see any familiar face. There's this oversexed bloke having fun throwing a well-salivated cone to his Doberman. This character in a tracksuit is new. Haven't seen him before. I sit on the bench and light a fag. The Doberman finds the cone with German diligence, fetches it to the owner, then waits for him to throw it again, dashes after it tirelessly, ad infinitum.

Now I'm going to take my phone, log on and, with self-destructive diligence, look at Nelly's holiday album. And all the while, the Doberman will chase the cone ...

‘Got a fag?’ Leo sits down beside me. We shake hands and I put the phone away in my pocket. He’s out early too. He’s wearing a tracksuit, but if the Doberman owner emits a healthy and affluent lifestyle, Leo’s threadbare outfit looks like a prison uniform. The prison and vodka parch one in a different way. I wonder if he has summed up the days, months and years spent behind bars. Leo is unaware that I celebrated his last release by drinking myself senseless. That day, Mediko phoned me and asked to get to her place. ‘Today we’re going to get drunk!’ she announced, sounding almost festive, and took out a large bottle of grappa from the cupboard.

We sat in the kitchen, drinking the home-made spirit. Mediko’s dad was playing Chopin’s nocturnes in the next room. Mediko was emptying one glass after another, talking to me and crying from time to time. That day an impossibly long and complicated history came to an end. That morning a stranger doffed his hat to Mediko in Vere Park and something snapped ... Something that had never been finally ended ...

After his last prison sentence, Leo never asked after Mediko. ‘How are things in the neighbourhood?’ he used to enquire and wink at me as if we shared a secret. In truth, nothing ever changes in the neighbourhood. In the evenings, Mediko has to step over the hugging couples, otherwise she can’t get home. Inside, there are plants assiduously watered by her dad and the smell of a spinster’s autumn hangs like a cobweb. Lots of flowering plants intensify the smell and sometimes even getting drunk isn’t a way out ...

‘Remember the car?’ Mediko asked me. I nodded. Of course I remembered it.

‘The funny part is that I don’t think about admirers, I don’t think about suitors, I don’t think about getting married. I think about the cars that used to stop for me but I never got in them ... Cars have become my erotic dreams. Funny, isn’t it?’

It wasn’t funny.

She seemed not to wait for Leo, but waited all the same. I wonder where else in the world such a thing can happen. Or rather, when nothing happens. Two people, living within a hundred yards from each other, having nothing in common, to be tied to each other with an invisible thread all their lives. It's a lie that Mediko didn't get married because she was afraid of Leo. No one was scared of him anymore. With time, Leo turned into just another ghost of Vere Park. It's not so much his actual age, but he looks older than other old ghosts. The prison ages one, just like a murder, and one day, when after serving his prison time, when Leo met Mediko, he didn't dare approach or speak to her, so he doffed his hat, smiled a toothless smile and something ended that very day ... Both were too old to start something new. It was all too late ...

He used to be real cool, they say about Leo and it's true ... The city remembers its heroes. Leo's native city is like a high security prison. Here you can't relax, can't feel free even if you're technically free. Light-mindedness is punished here. Nothing is hidden as the tidings travel from cell to cell, from one division into another. The details of one's good or bad behaviour follows one, or even precedes one, throughout one's life – from kindergarten to school, from school to university, then into the adult life, well into one's old age ...

Used to be real cool ... Since when has Leo's name been mentioned in the past tense? Probably from the day when the car he gave Mediko disappeared from Kiacheli Street. Someone – the Mayor's office, one of its clerks, a specific person or the whole system – decided to tow away the rusting BMW. Something changed that day. Earlier, whether Leo was in prison or out of it, no one would have dared to touch Mediko's car, Leo's gift to her.

I don't really remember how long the BMW had been parked in front of our house. It was there – a permanent fixture. As if destined to be there for eternity. For some it had become a dear thing, a local myth several generations had grown up with. A cool guy presented it to his

girlfriend but she refused to accept it. She was out of his league, a professor's daughter, with principles, but it looks as though she loved him. Sure she did! Others will agree, especially those who remember how it all began, but there aren't many of us left alive. If she hadn't loved him, she'd have got married. Was a beauty ... The bloke was great too, never backed away, could shoot and even kill, from time to time ... Always because of dignity and honour. He was a dueling type. Never caught for petty crimes. Always got long sentences ...

The engine of the BMW parked at 11 Kiacheli Street had never been started. It was there as a piece of scrap metal.

Those who recall the beginning of this story still greet Mediko with reverence, doffing their hats. For them she is the symbol of loyalty and chaste awaiting ...

The looted car, or bought with looted money, appeared in our street soon after the Tbilisi war. The military coup that occurred within a stone's throw from us marked a new stage in Mediko's life: now she had a car she would never drive and dad who would never leave home. In the neighbourhood, I believe even in the whole city, Postom was the only one who didn't know the BMW parked under their windows belonged to his daughter.

Last winter I walked my Lab up the Mtatsminda hill. The couple walking in front of me bid goodbye at the Conservatoire. The young man kissed the girl and walked on. The girl tugged at the violin case over her shoulder and stood looking at his disappearing back.

'That's a nice young man who accompanied you,' panting, a woman got out of a taxi making a lot of fuss about it. Those gossipy types invariably work in administration.

The girl didn't seem in the least perturbed that she was seen with a young man. Without as much as glancing at the busybody, she was still looking at his back, then said in a dreamy voice, as if talking to herself:

'If you only knew how he plays ...'

‘How would I?’ the administrator muttered like a grumpy mother-in-law, straightened her fur coat and went inside the Conservatoire. The girl stood staring at her disappearing young musician.

‘You’ve always fancied weird stories, haven’t you?’ Leo has attentively listened to me. He is an expert in listening. This time his slanting eyes never left the Doberman’s owner – his ideological and class enemy, gauche, a money bag, and God know what not. But now Leo is a harmless park ghost, maybe because he’s never betrayed his principles, served his times in full, withstood humiliation, lived through all the hardship only to face the vilest end: when he was finally released, he found himself in an alien city. And what he faced was more alien than the prison.

‘What do you say? Good story, isn’t it?’

Leo shrugs his shoulders:

‘You know better, bro.’

Enjoying the sunshine, Leo looks like a basking cat. Actually, it’s the languor of an ex-convict, inherited from an endless chain of seemingly identical days. Cats have nothing to do with it. Cats are waiting for me elsewhere ...

I haven’t told him the main thing. When I watched the girl with a violin, I thought that most probably Rostom didn’t even suspect there was a place for him and the likes of him in this city. That he could already leave home because things had changed recently ... But why recently? A quarter of a century had elapsed since then ...

‘What’s your buddy Tazo up to?’

‘I don’t see him very often.’

‘But you’re still friends, aren’t you?’

‘He rarely leaves home. Only goes to work.’

Leo flicks the butt in the general direction of the Doberman.

‘Sometimes it takes a hell of a lot of nerve to go out.’

Who says so? The man who has spent half of his life in the street and the other half behind bars. And he says it when I am thinking of Rostom and Tazo's at my place.

'Too bad if you don't see each other. You were great buddies. He liked Mediko, didn't he?'

He still mentions her, in a matter-of-fact way, but still.

'I think it was the other way round – Mediko liked him.'

The city's unbelievably small ...

'Don't assume too much.' Leo is clearly upset with my words but tries not to show it. Then he eyes me and smiles lopsidedly, 'You're better at telling stories about musicians.'

It's my turn to shrug. I take cigarettes from my pocket and we light one each.

I remember that evening when four musicians were robbed when leaving the dark foyer of the Philharmonic Hall after a rehearsal. For Rostom it was yet another proof that his decision not to go out was right. 'They've taken the Guarneri!' he kept repeating as he paced the room, pronouncing the name slightly differently from the rest of us. The Guarneri viola was taken from the State Quartet and one of them received a bad blow to his head with a gun handle. Rostom paced the room, repeating 'catastrophe' and 'Guarneri', while Mediko smoked at the window, looking at the precious present parked in the dark street. The sound of occasional gunfire reached our house from different parts of the city. The girl grown up in front of her namesake mirror was thinking about the lad who might have broken the heads of her dad's colleagues, depriving her of the hope for the future and the wish to live by taking away the Guarneri viola. Lost in thought with her cigarette by an oil lamp at the window, Mediko was beautiful.

They say Mediko has taken after her mother, a beautiful woman who had eloped with a shady businessman a long time ago.

The man and the dog have tired out each other. The owner ties the leash and takes the Doberman towards the park entrance. There's nothing left to entertain oneself in Vere Park. It's time for me to leave too.

'I'm off. Want me to leave you a couple of fags?'

'Just one. I'll buy some later.'

He will or won't, but that's Leo – there are certain things he will never do out of self-respect.

'See ya,' he shakes my hand and I rise from the bench. Thinking about Mediko and her gifts is too much so early in the morning.

That winter, it was the exams time in the Conservatoire. The girl with a violin was looking at her beloved who was walking away, the thick walls of the old building failed to contain all the arias and instruments, every sound oozed through them, filling the street with disharmony. But there was something inexplicably festive in all that musical jumble. I was only sorry that the disappearing virtuoso had never looked back at his girl, but still, it was great ...

Downstairs, below my flat, there's always music. Potted plants, flowers and music, and nothing else. Rostom waters the plants and hums Italian arias. If he isn't humming, he plays the piano, listens to music or talks about music.

'Mild sorrow is characteristic of Rachmaninoff ... The beginnings of Concerto 2 and 3 ... The orchestra breathes like an ocean, in waves. That's not Russian. No one can assure me in the opposite! It's all so different from everything Russian – I mean Korsakoff, Mussorgsky and other genuine Russians ... Rachmaninoff is eastern in character!'

To make his point more convincing he slaps the table with his open hand so that nobody dares doubt the truth of his words.

'I remember Concerto 3 performed by Van Cliburn. It was heavenly! Nikolai Lugansky's performance – surely completely different but still very

impressive. It takes you somewhere, you are utterly overwhelmed, want to cry, huge ants crawl in your stomach ...’

‘Like an orgasm?’ Mediko is smoking and glancing at her dad as if challenging him. It’s a usual feud of two theoreticians obliged to live under one roof. But it’s far from Bergman’s films. Everything is more straightforward and banal with us compared to the complicated narratives of the Lutheran priest’s son. In his masterpieces the enraged Swedes toss at each other the accusations that are so earnest they make you want to puke. Their confessions are so sincere they seem to draw your bile. They spare neither themselves nor their loved ones ... But at 11 Kiacheli Street, the father doesn’t even register his daughter’s belated revolt. He just doesn’t notice because nothing matters for him except his favourite flowers and collection of vinyl discs. The greatest misfortune would be if the needle of his record player broke and Mediko didn’t get it on time ... The civil war that never went further than the Iveria Hotel at the Republic Square, never reached our house, forced the musician to stay at home forever and, possibly, turned him into one of the happiest people in the city. For years, more and more joyfully, he has taken care of his plants, humming and humming to himself ... And in the meantime, returning from her work, Mediko sidesteps the hugging couples in our entrance and avoids looking at her own weary face in the mirror ...

‘Once he gave me a doll for my birthday,’ she told me drunkenly that day when she bumped into Leo just released from prison. ‘Neither before nor after that had he ever given me anything except flowers for my birthday. That’s what he did – brought me huge bunches. I really liked it, honestly! And suddenly he comes with that rubber doll. It must still be around here.’

The sound of music reached us from the next room. This time Rostom was playing Dave Brubeck’s *Take Five*.

‘You know, the doll was kind of second-hand, somewhat worn out, so I got jealous ... I must have been thirteen or fourteen, neither young nor old, but I immediately guessed he had come from that woman and that she

sent it to me as a present. Anyway, I was too old for dolls ... I accepted it and watched it with suspicion for a long time. I couldn't make myself to like it, besides, it wasn't a likable anyway but I kept it and used to look at it from time to time as if I was looking at the woman, a stranger who had stood between Dad and me. And now ...'

'Ваши пальцы пахнут ладаном²,' Rostom sang in Alexander Vertinsky's countertenor voice.

'Now I hope he had a really good time with that woman, for once. Had a time of his life. I'd like it to be that way ...'

I take the underpass and come up at School 51, then go into the first cafe. It's not a blind choice. I like it here. Through the glass door I can watch lots of passers-by, some of them my acquaintances. Here, the coffee isn't bad either. The coffee brewed by Shorena is what I need right now most of all.

Shorena is alone in the cafe. I surely am their first client today.

I drink my coffee and watch her. She is half-turned towards me, busy folding paper napkins and putting them in holders. Her monotonous and unruffled movements are more soothing to watch than the Doberman's crazy antics. The peaceful toil of folding squares into triangles ... However, I've come with a purpose. There's no one in the cafe apart from Shorena and me and she's busy. Leo is still in the park. Maybe I'll be left on my own for some time ... I take my phone from my pocket, put it on the table and log into the internet. I look through Nelly's, or rather her maniac vet's album, for the umpteenth time.

Looking at them is very much like violence against one's own self. But the author of those snapshots abuses his wife when first he takes those photos and then posts them for the whole world to see. He's not a harmless vet but a real manic and I've always suspected there was something sick in his obsession with cats. In the meanwhile, constantly

² (Rus.) Your fingers smell of incense.

looking at the snapshots has turned me into a maniac too. Either I am mental or the entire society that adds their likes or ecstatic comments, completely oblivious of the threat posed by this man and his snapshots. I'd like to be wrong, to find that Nelly's partner is a normal bloke with a healthy psyche, but there is something really irrational or bizarre in the meticulousness with which he first takes and then posts even the most trifling moments of their trip, every single monument, whether important or unimportant, every possible Nelly and every single cat they come across, and no one can make me change my mind about his sanity.

An alarming number of cats and even more Nellys ... There is something feline in this blond vet with speckled eyes. Bedouins' cats, cats in a Tel Aviv street cafe, cats at the Dead Sea ... And Nelly who pats them with an air of obedient detachment. My heart sounds an alarm. I'm not even sure she likes cats at all. I might sound funny but I can do nothing to quell this feeling: I see ominous signs in the perfect outlines of the scenery, in the symmetrical compositions and even in the desert itself.

Nelly is curled on the top of a cliff like a cat. Below, a serpent-like road meanders towards her. The road winding in the wilderness is absolutely empty. Not a single car on it. What does Nelly feel looking at the road? Is she scared or does she enjoy the scenery that seems to have travelled from Antonioni's films?

Deserted highways stretching from one city to another, from one country to another. Camels everywhere and notices saying: 'Beware of camels'. There are other signs that the cat-man posted. They are in three languages – Hebrew, Arabic and English. I can only read in English: 'The road passes through the territory controlled by the PLO. Citizens of Israel are forbidden to enter. Danger to your life and against the Israel laws.' Does the daring cat-man still cross into the territory and take Nelly with him? Or he doesn't and I'll never find out because the snapshot with a cut-throat razor at his throat might have been taken in a barber's shop in Jerusalem. The rest of the photos are taken at the Wailing Wall. Nelly has a light scarf round her shoulders and I can swear it's the one I gave her.

And that cut-throat razor! Flashing a white-tooth smile, an Arab barber is shaving the vet's nearly hairless, white European face. The snapshot has received the most likes. 'How come you weren't scared?' his friends comment. 'There was nothing to be scared of,' the brave vet replies, stubbornly venturing into the depths of the parched, barren land sculpted by the sun and the wind, luring Nelly deeper and deeper.

Apparently, it can rain there too. When I see wet streets, I think they've been washed, but no, it's after rain and a rainbow semi-circle glows above a green-painted mosque dome. Nelly in a bathing robe with a towel wrapped around her head. Her hand is raised – a gesture asking not to take her picture, but the protest is somewhat feeble. A steamy shower cabin behind her ... And the road again ... Nelly is buying some eastern sweets. Several fat cats that the vet couldn't ignore and Nelly again, this time against the backdrop of gutted sheep carcasses hanging in a line.

They travel on. 'Danger! Mines!' the sign by the roadside warns them in three languages. No traffic along the highway. Numerous signs. Mines everywhere. The whole desert is strewn with mines. It's only possible to let a sigh of relief in an oasis. One can even walk around. Nelly is taking a walk in a fairy tale gorge, jumping over rivulets. The oasis trees have wide leaves and twisted shapes, absolutely alien for our imagination. When I see her calmly strolling in such lush greenery, I begin to question my suspicions, thinking everything is going to be fine. After several snapshots they leave the oasis. The desert again ... Swings in the desert ... Why do lone swings give the landscape such an outlandish look, as if it's not our earth at all? Nelly is on the swings but I can't see her expression. Her loose hair is hiding her face, she's looking down, probably at yellow pebbles ... I seem to hear the screech of the swings. It's getting darker. Nelly's shadow on the screechy swings elongates, stretching endlessly into the desert. There's not a single living being as far as an eye can see, well into the horizon.

A winding highway across the desert, more signs that warn that there are mines, camels and shooting nearby. The camels were there well

before the shooting started, before wells were poisoned ... They've been there from time immemorial. They might even remember the extinct southern elephant – Tazo's and my old buddy ... They were there when this barren land gave birth to three major religions of the world, one after another ... Will the camels still be there when the clash of three religions is over?