

Mineral Jazz

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1

In the beginning there was the word, followed by irreversible consequences. And then one day the Moscow Circus arrived to Tbilisi.

One of the leading Georgian newspapers of the time wrote about the tour: 'Tbilisi hasn't seen an as impressive spectacle for quite a while.' But it was a lie because Tbilisi had never seen anything like that, let alone for a while. However, all this is not important compared to the fact that during the Moscow Circus performance Count Pier Orlov, the old conjuror, died in his dressing room, in front of his mirror.

Clearly, Pier Orlov was no more a count than Yuri Gagarin was a maharaja. It was a simple stunt used on the billboards to attract more spectators. His skin was olive colored, he had high cheekbones and narrow, Kirgiz eyes; in a way he resembled Madame Chauchat. Definitely not a count, Orlov truly was a magician; he used to appear on the arena wrapped in a blue velvet cloak embroidered with stars as big as fists and golden crescents. First of all, he would greet the audience with a deep bow, bending in half until his forehead nearly touched the tip of his Oriental slippers. Then he would circle the arena, holding his palms open, just like Christ, for everyone to see. And finally, he would roll up his sleeves to assure even the most suspicious spectator he wasn't hiding anything up his sleeve. Standing there, with rolled-up sleeves and open palms, he would suddenly conjure a dove or a watermelon, or anything else for that matter. But it wasn't only pulling things out of nowhere, because the Count could perform things others wouldn't even think of. For instance, he could fry an egg on his palm, or produce a frightful lion and if the beast roared, he could pull out its tongue with a slight turn of his hand and twist it around his little finger.

Before the Moscow Circus arrived, the Georgian newspapers ran a promotional campaign, reminiscent of a pre-election fever. One of them carried a story according to which the Count had spent his childhood in Tibet, that he had no surname as such and his real name was Lima, and that he had been coached by the monks to perform his tricks. The published photo also enhanced the effect and the bunch of lies worked wonders. Another paper said he was born in India, not in Tibet, that Pier Orlov was an alias while his real name was Rabindranath Hussein, that his father was a well-known prophet, fortune-teller and adventurer, hanged in 1936 by the British in Kanpur. The story also said the family faced hard times after the bread-winner's death, so the mother left little Rabi and his baby sister at

the doorstep of a Krishna temple, while she jumped into the Ganges with a boulder tied to her neck with a rope. Later, the orphan children were taken care of by the fakirs, who taught them the magic tricks. Yet another paper refuted every other publication, claiming that he wasn't Indian at all, and in fact a Jew by the name of Cogan from Odessa, a son of an alcoholic father who had exchanged the baby boy with the gypsies for a bottle of vodka. There was more to it, the paper stated: During WWII, Orlov was in the Red Army, but was unlucky enough to be captured by the Allied Forces in Warsaw. He was detained on charges of being a double spy and put in prison, but he escaped and reached Kiev where he worked as a nurse in a hospital. After a month of changing stinking bed linen for the wounded soldiers, he somehow managed to steal the documents of an American, then bought a railway ticket to Moscow. Indeed, the press was full of similar stories.

Later it transpired that similar or even wilder rumors circulated about Orlov in Moscow. No one would have been able to tell apart the truth from lies. The Count himself didn't deny anything, neither did he confirm any information. He just smiled at every new publication. That was all. Incidentally, his gentle smile only added fuel to the fire. Unending and unrestrained rumors wrapped him in mystique, shrouding his name in a mysterious mist. Rumours aside, fact was that the Count had travelled the world thanks to his magic tricks. He seemed to have been everywhere: He could go to bed in Berlin and wake up in Vienna, drink wine in Paris and fight his hangover in London, start his salute in Baku and finish it in Saint-Petersburg.

Anyway, the aging Count came to Tbilisi with the rest of the troupe to show his world-famous tricks. The circus teemed with acrobats, clowns, dwarfs, fairies....The music was so loud that if you closed your eyes, it felt as if the drumsticks were hitting your temples. The grotesque din of the festive circus jazz merged with the roar of a lion and yelps of a dog. From time to time, the whistles and booms from the hall threatened to burst the circus dome. Altogether, it sounded like the end of the world. The smells of sweat, sawdust and dung had mixed, adding to the effect.

The Count was sitting in front of the mirror in his dressing room, applying the make-up and humming to himself in time with the orchestra. He was in no hurry. He loved his job. Whatever he did, he did it with exquisite finesse. The toilet table was covered with make-up jars, brushes and cotton wool wads. A brown bear crouched at the door, trying to tie the laces of the clown shoes on its hind legs. It panted and groaned like a drunken man. The beast wore a pair of black satin pants and a sleeveless white shirt. A bicycle was right there, next to it, leaning against the wall.

When the Count finished with his make-up, he reached for the gown hanging on the wall. He attempted to rise but his knees gave way and he lowered himself on the chair again. He immediately sensed he wouldn't be able to get to his feet. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror, bitterly chuckling at his own expression. Then he turned and beckoned the bear

with his finger. He took a piece of sugar from his waistcoat pocket and put it into the bear's mouth: 'Here, Brownie.' He managed that much, then slid his hand down his face – closed his eyes: He performed the greatest trick of his life, the most genuine, and dropped his dead face into the powder.

Startled, the bear nearly choked on the caramel. It stood frozen, not sure what to do. Then it gnashed its teeth, let out a heavy sigh, turned round, grabbed its bicycle and pushed it out into the passage.

The orchestra boomed and blasted as loud as ever. The impression was that the musicians were racing against the time and each other. Hasty notes came in funny syncopes, the trumpet cackling like a hyena. The stale air seemed to vibrate with music. Pierrots and Harlequins, clowns and fairies, acrobats and jugglers mingled, crowding the entire area. Here and there arena assistants in green tweed uniforms were seen among the artists. They moved so swiftly and lightly, they didn't seem to belong to this world. Their golden buttons glittered in the bright lights, hitting the eyes. Everyone was shouting across each other's heads, but no one heard: The infernal jazz had permeated even the walls of the long passage.

The bear came swaying heavily, waddling like an enormous duck, its huge shoes that looked like flippers slowing it down, and it was pushing its bicycle towards the exit. The beast made its way through the crowd, fighting the human flow with stubborn determination. A cleaner with a broom was busy at the open stage door.

When a shadow fell on him, the man straightened up and stared at the bear in disbelief, as if reproaching it for wandering about. In fact not as if because he stood very upright:

'Hey, you! Where to?' he asked and blocked the bear's way. 'Get out of here! Twice as fast!' he yelled and tightened his grip of the broom, just in case.

The bear, though, turned a deaf ear, didn't budge, just stood there staring into the cleaner's eyes. The latter turned out to be rather tough because he returned the stare. The bear stirred, hooked the bicycle bell with its claw and went 'ding-dong', as if asking to let it pass by. In reply, the cleaner suddenly stepped back, dropped his broom and drew a whistle from his pocket. For a second it glittered in the bright light before he put it into his mouth. He must have blown it with all his might because he went very red in the face, his veins popping up on his neck as if ready to burst one by one. But no one heard the whistle, except the bear: The funny, burlesque jazz sounded louder than ever. The man must have been driven by ill fate because he didn't give in. Instead, he puffed his cheeks, blew the whistle as hard as he could, strained like a fool, cackled and hooted like a bird caught in a trap.

The bear was losing patience. It waved its paw, as if saying enough was enough, and moved forward, pushing the man with its belly. But instead of making way for the animal, the man, clearly out of his mind, went for its neck and began to wrestle with the bear! Even the celebrated Maugis the Hermit didn't bear himself more valiantly with the bourdon and

pilgrim's staff against the Saracens as our cleaner did armed with a whistle. He gouged out one of its eyes. Man is an inexplicable being indeed. At most times he wets himself at the slightest danger, at times scared at his own shadow, but then suddenly and quite unexpectedly able to fight a mammoth of a beast with his bare hands.

Confused, the bear stepped back, let go of its bicycle, but the cleaner, encouraged by his little victory, didn't give in and moved along with the half-blinded beast, probably to make sure it was fully blinded. When he raised his hand aiming at the other eye, the bear, a rather humble animal, unbroken by the cruelty with which the world had treated it, didn't think twice: It opened its mouth wide and snapped the threatening hand at the wrist. Then he hit the man's head with a powerful blow of its paw, cracking and crashing the skull. The whistle dropped to the ground with a muffled tinkle.

The reader might expect the bear to climb its bike and ride out of the circus, right? But that would be an extremely cheap trick, wouldn't it? We'd better forget about the bicycle, my dears. You might as well question the necessity of mentioning it in the first place, and you would have a *bone fide* reason for doing so. There was no real need to mention the bicycle. However, it's good to remember that, as a rule, it's such kind of petty, unimportant details you might wish to know that fill not only thick novels but tiny miniatures as well. On the whole, if the bicycle and the one-eyed bear aren't mentioned here, or fortune-teller Poco and Shamugia, the senior investigator, aren't mentioned there, we won't be able to move at all, to progress even a bit.

The prostate cleaner was biting the slabs when the bear spit out his hand, stepped over the bike and lumbered out of the circus.

2

If someone thinks the Ochigavas have no connection with Japan, they should think again. They do. The thing is that this common Georgian family name has a somewhat Japanese ring to it, even has the same number of syllables as a Japanese word. If we add an appropriate first name, it'll surely pass for Japanese, for instance, Yukio, Ryunosuke or Kenzaburo. Just imagine, Kenzaburo Ochigava – doesn't it sound Japanese?

But still, there isn't a single Ochigava with a Japanese first name. Their majority, as a rule, have European, or rather, Greek names. Neither is the Ochigava family living in Tskhneti Street an exception: The father is called Panteleimon (after his great grandad), the only son is Petre, or Peto (that's how Panteleimon's father was called at home). As for Panteleimon's wife and Peto's mum, she is Natela Malania, from an obscure village in Samegrelo.....

Oh, we've got to be very careful, gentlemen. I did say 'an obscure village', but I won't reiterate, hoping the reader can easily imagine it. But no, I don't suppose it's an easy task. There are certain passages where the author has to be extremely clear and precise. More than

often reliance on the reader's imagination is far from beneficial, in fact is rather harmful. That's why poor authors get blamed for saying this or that and they are obliged to justify themselves, explaining what they meant, that they were misunderstood and so on and so forth. To avoid such kind of misunderstanding, let's clarify what is meant by 'an obscure village', especially because the reader has no time to dwell on each and every trope and epithet. At most, one can visualize frothing soapy water in a dishwashing tub, hens cuddled in shade and cattle that have sneaked into the neighbor's field. At the very most. But that's not enough. We need to stress the fact that civilization hasn't really reached some remote places, which means that blood feud and *tsatsloba*¹ are as ordinary for the locals as going to McDonalds or enjoying cyber sex for city residents. Not only in our country, but I suppose there are plenty of places in the world, isolated and remote, where people still live in glasshouse conditions. But still, however remote or obscure, one can surely see bikinis drying on a clothes line in such villages. And this scene greets our eye when, not only electricity and television, but even basic sewage (in theory available for every decent person) is nonexistent. Latrines in the 21st century. Even the most creative sci-fi author cannot come up with such a phantom. At most he can write about aliens from outer space arriving to destroy our planet, but he would be unable to conjure an image of a latrine and the trendy pair of a bikini. (Oh, the attraction of the intimate, scanty underwear hanging out to dry in a row!) Wearing the latest fashion items doesn't automatically mean thinking in line with the modern world. Quite the opposite. If you look around, you can discover that a bushman or a cannibal wearing a Chicago Bulls T-Shirt might have had his dad for breakfast.

Wow, some sidetracking! Started with Japan, ended up with Africa and Australia. Real gibberish. Don't do nothing about it, let's leave it as it is, because even if I wish, I can't change anything and forget about deleting what's already written because every word I write belongs to the state, not to me.

Anyway, I was saying that Natela Malania came from such a remote, obscure village that is hard to imagine. Apart from Auntie Tamar no one knew anything about her family. Auntie Tamar lived in Mtatsminda, in an old part of the city, across the street from the old Courthouse, as the Ochigavas remembered later. She was a somewhat strange character. 'Definitely strange', as Panteleimon used to attest. True, the wonderful spinster was a very distant relative, but she was the only one from Natela's side that ever visited the Ochigavas.

White and neat, she was a tiny old woman. Without exception, she was wearing a brown coat, slightly discoloured around the shoulders, with a squirrel fur collar, and a squirrel hat, perched at one side of her little head. Her face was covered in wrinkles and the skin sagged on her neck. She always visited the family on New Year's Eve. She didn't have much, but she never came empty-handed. Sometimes it was a pie with an egg yolk crust

¹An ancient tradition in the mountainous regions of Georgia: forbidden love when teenagers spent time together, became intimate friends but were forbidden to marry each other.

wrapped in a newspaper, or at other times a bunch of *churchkheldas*². On Peto's first birthday she brought him a crisp one hundred-rouble note, God knows how many months it took her to save the sum from her meager pension, and a silver spoon with an enamel squirrel with a raised bushy tail on the handle. (The enamel has long broken into pieces, but the spoon is still used by the Ochigava household. The strangest part is that it tends to disappear only to reappear quite unexpectedly.)

Panteleimon used to pour her a glass of brandy, which she sipped throughout the evening. Little by little her watery eyes would begin to glitter as if ready to burst into tears. After telling stories she had heard, listening to the news and remembering the past, she would invariably end up saying: 'Oh, nearly forgot,' and fumble in her handbag hanging from the back of the chair. She used to squint her tiny eyes and rummage inside her bag long enough to attract Peto's attention. At the time the bag seemed to be a treasure chest for little Peto. Finally, she would draw out a sweet in a shiny wrapping or a chewing gum or a bright wall sticker and:

'Who's the boy with hernia?' she asked, not addressing anyone in particular.

'I am,' Peto would stretch himself to his full height with childish diligence.

But Auntie wouldn't immediately react, pretending she hadn't heard. She would turn to the adults, as if asking them if the boy could be trusted.

Panteleimon would say nothing, just cough out a short 'Hm', while Natela insisted she was the boy with hernia, going for a sweet or a chewing gum.

'I want it, I want it,' Peto repeated to himself, silently, as if trying to memorize the phrase. His eyes used to sparkle with childish cruelty.

'If someone wants the sweet, he must kiss me,' Auntie said and turned her head, offering Peto her wrinkled cheek.

Only once did Peto refuse to kiss her and she immediately put the treat back into her bag. Half-jokingly, half-hurt, she asked:

'Is that final?'

He nodded, sternly, with his arms akimbo.

3

We've got to mention another wonderful elderly person: Panteleimon's mother, Peto's Gran and Natela's mother-in-law, Evgenia or Zhenia Ochigava.

Zhenia is lean, with somewhat male features. Luckily, she moves around in a wheelchair because if she got to her feet, she'd be a whole head taller than anyone else in the family. Being confined to a wheelchair could have made any two men miserable, but not this aging woman. That's how it is nowadays – in our crazy times, if you're in a wheelchair,

²A traditional New Year's sweet: Whole walnuts strung together, dipped in thickened grape juice and dried for longer storage and later consumption.

you're half a man, kind of. But it doesn't refer to Zhenia in the least. She's managed to adapt to her condition wonderfully, making it impossible to imagine her without her chair. In fact, it's the wheelchair that completes her portrait. As the stars adorn the sky, as the flowers make the field look beautiful and as exquisite jewellery embellishes a beauty, Zhenia's wheelchair does the same for her.

She sits very upright, as if to spite her ills, with a cigarette forever hanging from the corner of her mouth. Her ornate ivory ashtray rests on her lap. Above her aquiline nose, many lines have deeply creased her forehead, and her eyes are ash colour. The moment her piercing eyes catch yours, you are hooked, ready to do whatever she asks you to. She's ancient, but has never needed glasses. Her eyebrows are still bushy, her neck held up, proudly. But the skin hangs down her neck like a turkey's wattle. In general, she resembles an old turkey. At a glance, it looks as if her lips are tightly sealed like those of a fish, but if you look more closely, you'll discover she has no lips to talk about. A semblance of a smile can occasionally be made out crossing her face. As for her clothes, she always dresses in some antediluvian rags that reek of mothballs, mainly a brown, rarely a lizard greenish-grey skirt with starched white lace around the hem. What's more, all her skirts have such narrow pleats that make you think the devil himself worked on them. She doesn't wear a traditional headdress, but otherwise she might have descended from a medieval engraving.

Now, Panteleimon Ochigava is the spitting image of his mum, not wearing a dress though and not moving around in a wheelchair, otherwise he's alike: Lean as a rake, with a horse face, hooked nose, ash-grey eyes and so on. The main differentiating feature is his moustache, which he wears like a stamp glued above his upper lip. His taste in clothes is likewise strange. If he's at home, he usually wears a jogging suit. I've got nothing against such suits, but his is made of some synthetic fiber that is excessively tight, but sags at the knees and looks like a used rag around the bottom. Don't forget we're talking about a respectable doctor without whom no one would have dreamt of diagnosing a patient in the Infectious Diseases Hospital where he used to work. At home he moves around like a grasshopper. And that's not all. One day he might decide he is getting a cold unless he takes precautions, that's why he might start the day with a clove of garlic and even put his feet in a tub with hot water, just in case. If he senses it's getting cooler, he usually dons a night cap, fastens it under his chin as if he's a baby, and shuffles around with his slippers like a sleepwalker. Those are no better than his pajamas: His big toe is about to drill a hole and look out.

He is restless, always moving around, checking the iron or a tap or the radio. They're in perfect order, working properly, but Panteleimon doesn't trust any equipment. If asked why he unscrewed the iron, he'd say it wasn't warm enough, or the tap was leaking and kept him awake all night. And he'd think of a fault to justify why he fiddled with the radio. He usually walks about the flat with a spanner or a pair of pliers or a tube of glue in his hand.

Often he's got a piece of insulation tape in his mouth as he checks every inch of the wiring in case it needs mending. Had he been a surgeon, his fussing would be relatively easy to explain, because every career leaves its deep marks, but we're dealing with an ex-infectious disease doctor, aren't we?

Natela is plump and rather short, not bigger than a dove. Her greying hair is wavy and her eyes are light blue. Frankly speaking, she's a bit shallow. She doesn't need a punch line to send her into peals of laughter. No, she isn't fond of mindless feasting and noisy parties, but whatever she is doing, she accompanies herself with humming. Want to know what it is? Jazz medleys. Or rather she makes those bass sounds with her mouth: dab-dub-dib-dob-deb. And it's real hell. If you were obliged to only listen to bass parts, even if it were Mingus or Pastorius, it'd drive you nuts. Bass is meant to keep the rhythm, in rare cases it can have a short solo within the composition, but listening incessantly to a double bass or a bass guitar without any accompaniment is, as I've just said, hellish. Even worse, because Natela is tone-deaf. If the TV or radio isn't on, the flat is filled with her yabadabadoo. It doesn't affect anyone except Peto but he has never stopped her. Let alone everything else, she's his mum, right? It's a well-known fact that one of the tortures in Auschwitz concentration camp was making the inmates listen to the same tune over and over again until they lost their minds altogether. Peto seems to experience something similar. Of course Natela isn't aware she tortures her son or else she'd stop it. On the other hand, she's a peaceful person, avoiding conflicts at all cost. Rather blissful, forever in a good mood.

And finally, there's only Peto left. He's taken after both parents, but in his own way. He's as lean as his dad and as short as his mum, so skinny he doesn't cast a shadow and so short he can hide behind a gas stove. He is neither the knight of a sorrowful countenance nor a sad, lonesome poet. Peto is a scatter-brained adolescent, a bit of a dimwit. Anyway, he doesn't deserve a minute of your attention, dear ladies and gentlemen. I'd just want to say that he is crazy about jazz, but not the kind his mum hums. And that's all.

You might as well ask what is magical about loving jazz, and you'll be absolutely right. It is pure magic. But what do I mean by saying his brains are twisted? Have you ever heard that if love creeps in through a lad's ear, it squeezes out his brain through the other? That's how Peto's case can be described. But still, what is the love of jazz? Is it the kind of infantile disorder that will disappear with time? No, sirs, it's not going to disappear on its own, especially in Peto's case, because it's not a natural, inbred affection. If Peto says something, he'll stick to it for good. Once he said he loved jazz and that was that. Even if he didn't enjoy it, he'd do everything to fall in love with it. You might say it sounds like a whim, not like genuine love at all. But let me ask you, isn't love a kind of a whim, too? Does it make a huge difference whether you are really madly in love or make yourself fall in love? For instance, I don't like writing at all, but I convince myself that I do, as a consequence I keep writing. And if I do, the act of love is accomplished. Cross my heart and hope to die.

But please don't think Peto was born with the love for jazz. It didn't burst out suddenly, rather wormed its way into his heart later, slowly and surely, creeping slyly, eventually poisoning his soul. No one is aware of it in his family. More precisely, everyone knows but they choose not to notice, believing Peto's sensitive age will soon pass and he'll get over it. At least that's what Natela assures Panteleimonof, as well as herself. As if jazz is an artful spinster meddling with the lad's mind and scheming to find her way into the Ochigava family. Natela doesn't seem to realize that jazz has firmly established itself in their lives, deserving to be taken seriously. Panteleimon finds it hard not to slap his son. But how can he when this gentle person, so naive in his magnanimous nature, cannot even slap a mosquito? Forget about slapping the boy. It's sometimes really necessary because it helps, though.