

# Wisdom of Fancy

*Translated by Ekaterine Machitidze*

*Edited by Lara Sigwart*

## **Chapter 1** **ABOUT ME**

Once upon a time there was the small provincial town of Telavi and there was a great man who lived in that town of Telavi and his name was NOTE. So, the great man by the name of NOTE, who lived in the small provincial town of Telavi, was I.

## **Chapter 2** **ABOUT C**

There is a water channel along the town of Telavi and everyone calls this channel Khevi, a ravine. The structure that provides passage over Khevi is called PikrisKhidi, which means a thoughtful bridge, or simply Khidi, a bridge. This thoughtful bridge spans between two parts of the town. The left part is called Dzveli Galavani, an ancient wall, in Georgian. As for the right part of Telavi, here you can see the central square and the crenellated wall of the Royal Palace of the Kings of Kakheti, which was built by Archil II in the seventeenth century. Within the wall, there is the Gallery of Art and the School No.1. VazhaPshavela and I and many other men of mark studied at this school. In the vicinity of the same educational institution you can see the Museum of Ethnography and the remains of the Palace of Erekle II. On the opposite side of the palace there is a hill crowned by the Hotel Intourist, a true specimen of the Soviet classics. In summer, everyone gathers at the square where you can see an enormous building. Some people think it might have been a department store or a railway station, but since the 1970s it has been accommodating the Public Theatre of Telavi. The hazardous building of the old theatre, which had been called the House of Culture till 2012, was replaced by the white House of Justice, a typical specimen of President Saakashvili's (2003-2013) architecture. There was a bar in the vault of the House of Culture, the Baroque Bar. When I was a child, we often visited that bar. The red piano-shaped board with gold letters was considered to be the signboard of the establishment, and the establishment itself was a large smoke-filled hall. I got acquainted with C there. She was standing before the bartender, sipping her drink haughtily. She had shoulder-long, loose hair. You could see a white T-shirt under the short jean jacket. "Rape me..." was printed on the T-shirt. She looked at me indifferently and took another sip from the flat glass. I took my drink and picked my way toward the table in the center of the bar. It was still early, but I knew everyone would rush into the bar soon and many would try to lure her. Oh, she seemed to be quite experienced. Her dispassionate eyes betrayed her: She knew what she was doing. I'd bet my life that she wasn't a native of Telavi. It was obvious that she was waiting for somebody. She looked at the clock once or twice. She didn't fidget. She didn't show interest in anything, just casually looked at the clock. Her indifference was a mask, an obvious

disguise of her tension. I was drinking my whiskey indifferently too, drinking and indifferently keeping my eye on her.

It was 17:55. Ali was just about to come. I was going to get a gift, three bags of heroine, for my cousin. He had these withdrawal pains and was waiting for me at home.

I hated meeting that skinny ginger Chechen with fishy, bluish eyes. When he looked up at you, you immediately knew how cruel he could be. The police made him push drugs. Oh, I'd rather die than meet the man. I shove my hand into the jacket and caressed the hilt of my Beretta. It helped to pluck my courage. Ali was always late. I couldn't wait to wrap up the whole thing. Then I took one more gulp of whiskey and saw Sharp, coming down the stairs and emboldening me. It's good when there's a friend of yours at a place like that bar. Sharp dashed to the girl. She flung herself at his head and I witnessed a sultry kiss. It struck me dumb. Finally, Sharp saw me. He grasped the girl's hand and they both sat down at my table.

"How are you, Note?" asked Sharp and we shook hands.

"Fine, Sharpie. What's new with you?"

"Let me introduce my wife to you", said Sharpie, pointing to the girl whose indifferent expression had already been replaced by strangely glistening eyes.

"C", uttered the girl and put out her hand.

"Note", I murmured in embarrassment and kissed her hand automatically.

It was stupid. We all laughed.

"How are things going?"

"Ah! Waiting for Ali... Have to bring some dope to that blockhead".

"Pains again?"

"Yes, pains".

"Anything else?"

"Nothing".

"I heard about Big Flat being shot..."

"Yeah, the day before yesterday..."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know... Strangers... Shot him down with Kalashnikovs at that corner", I pointed at a small three-seat table in the far end of the room.

"You were here?"

"No, we were drinking together. I was the first one to leave. A quarter of an hour later, they came and shot him down without saying a word".

"Poor Flat!"

"Yeah, I took pity on him, too. Jibe says, if anyone else is murdered here, they'll shut down the place".

"Is everyone going to drink outside?"

"The fuzz men have got mad. Three murders a week... It is no joke".

"Will he really shut down the bar?"

"No. I think he has a lot of worries".

"So... What about you?"

"About me... Absolutely nothing. When did you get married?"

"She's pretty, isn't she?" said Sharp proudly.

She blushed and reproached him tenderly.

“The most beautiful”, I said. I’d never been so unfeigned in my life.

“Haven’t you tried to entice her?”

“No, I haven’t”.

“Is he speaking the truth, dear?” Sharpie asked his wife.

“I even thought he was a gay. He didn’t even look at me”.

“Man, failed to get it up?”

“Have to force it? I hate meeting that bastard Ali. He always damps my spirits... Just can’t wait to get rid of him”.

“Yeah..., a hot stuff he is”.

“You left just for a month and came back with a wife, man!”

“We got acquainted and got married right away”, Sharpie put his arm around C’s shoulders.

And then we saw Ali, coming down the stairs together with two thugs. Without saying hello, he headed for the kitchen. Caressing the hilt of my Beretta, I stood up from the chair.

“I’ll be back in a minute”.

“Ok”, Sharpie seemed to be indifferent.

There was a blind and damp small room at the back of the kitchen. Ali used to come to the bar and sell heroine there once a week. Everyone knew that he worked for the police. If they arrested you, you’d have to bring a couple of thousand bucks and buy your own heroine from Ali once again. A pure and simple plan...

“How are you?” I asked as a matter of courtesy.

“Good. How much?”

“Three bags”.

“Take it...”, Ali slid the bags out of his pocket and handed them to me. In my turn, I gave him three one-hundreddollar bonds and said good-bye reluctantly.

“Bye”, said Ali with a toneless voice and followed me with his bluish expressionless eyes.

I had a sigh of relief when I came out of the room. The customers were gathering at the bar counter. I downed some vodka and went upstairs. C and Sharp were still sitting at the table.

When I came home, my cousin was running with sweat, suffering badly. He wasn’t alone: There were his pals in the room. Oh, how they treasured the dope I’d just brought! How they hurry-scurried. I went out. I didn’t want to return to the bar and went to press the bricks, but finally, unable to think of something better, visited the bar again and again saw C and Sharp, who were still sitting at my table, already tight. The place was crammed and humming with the voices of the visitors underscored with earsplitting music. I felt like killing someone.

\*

In every small town everyone knows everything about the others, but in the small town of Telavi people are most aware of one another’s love affairs. They know who’s the one you’ve shacked up with, who’s the one you wanted to shack up with and who’s the one you’ll shack up with in the future, and if you’re charismatic enough, here you stand a good chance to understand all the hot buttons of popularity.

\*

I’ve got through it myself. I was fifteen then. The 1990s were a murky time in Georgia, murky in every sense of the word and there were two rays of light in this realm of darkness: the Beatles and C. Brutality

was the only way to assert oneself, but for some reason it never attracted me. The streets were full of those who were downtrodden and those who trod down. Of course, the girls were fond of the oppressors more than of the oppressed ones. So, trying not to take part in the oppression initiated by my friends, I managed not to share the fate of the oppressed. I don't know why, but I was always in the spotlight and I wouldn't have survived if I didn't perform my role as it had to be performed. I never parted with my gun. Yes, I'd rather die than shoot anyone, but the fact that I wore a gun put everyone off who was keeping me down. To make a long story short, the night when I got acquainted with C I was acting my usual part, but I sensed that for her I was an unconvincing actor: She didn't seem to be afraid of me. I was scared and alarmed: She'd easily grasp that I wasn't as tough as I wanted everyone to believe. I was afraid she'd share her arguments with Sharp who'd by all means do something to try my strength. Since that night, I had always been trying to avoid meeting C.

Sharp was the boss of our gang. Of course, we never called the group a gang, saying we all were chums, but the group didn't have a lot in common with friendship: It was simply impossible to keep apart then. No one would come on his jack to tread you down. He'd necessarily be accompanied by ten or fifteen. They could even not rob you of your money, but would take pleasure in demonstrating that they had advantage over you. A gang, like all natural formations, had its undeclared leader, who, as a rule, was the most cruel and brutal among the members of his horde. And Sharp was a true leader, but as much as I was the cleverest of his gang and could persuade people better than others, as much as I wore a Beretta (the most dangerous among all guns) instead of a TT, a Stechkin and even a Makarov, which could be easily found at the market, whatever I said, it was always important and we were potential competitors, rivals.

Yes, Sharp had a quite strong reason to destroy me and I had a quite strong reason to be afraid of C. I constantly tried to avoid her and thought about her constantly. Oh, that girl with the unusually deep eyes, her self-restraint and the ability to tell lies even better than I could... She threatened me and attracted me at the same time. Then I threw off the panic and decided to keep watch over the enigmatic creature. The task seemed to be unbelievably hard. She wasn't born in Telavi, but she conformed to our rules. Sticking indoors, she even helped Sharp's mother in the household. In the beginning, the woman wasn't exactly mad with the taste of her daughter-in-law, but later, when she saw that C was acquiescent, peaceful and obedient, she even praised her to spite the neighbors. Now they needed a child, an infant who'd let the town believe that a true new family was going to dwell in it. Besides, baby-sitting would be the best excuse for the reticence of the beautiful young mom. According to local traditions, C could go out only during daytime, for only a certain purpose, of course, and be back again till dusk. This marriage didn't change Sharp. No, it changed him: It made him more stuck-up and I realized that marriage was the finishing stroke that underpinned his superiority.

\*

Making friends with a girl was something not to be thought of. No, you could have a girl-friend, but no one would ever believe in friendship between a girl and a boy. Due to the local climate of thoughts, C never joined any of our snuggles. You could surely be friends with a girl if she was your neighbour or a classmate, but the terms of friendship were hard and fast. Hobnobs, generally hosted by one of our families, were the principal arena of such friendship. As for restaurants, restaurants were for men and trumpets. So, the only chance to meet C was to attend the revels held at Sharp's at least once a month. Thus, one day, though with an effort but still, I managed to take a step.

Sharp lived in a once low detached house. When his father earned some money, they built a wall around the house to protect it from prying eyes and added a storey. They also arranged a concrete balcony with a painted balustrade made of iron pipes. The grey color, the cut-off walls, the quadrangular shapes and the coarseness of every single detail were depressing. The splendid ornamentation of the interior was quite vulgar. The half-height wood panels on the walls, the off-white wallpaper with odd flowers above the paneling and the cumbersome pieces of the hand-carved furniture had nothing in common with one another. Hell with the furniture, especially from a distance, but when you came closer to the house you'd necessarily see an untidy workshop full of sawdust and filthy craftsmen. And the untidiness of the workshop together with the leather armchairs and furs spread on them would make you think that the family you were visiting was well-to-do and the hosts just had been solicitous about accentuating their material wellbeing instead of combining things appropriately. No one had ever thought about the practical purpose of the very same things. Many of them, the not-too-beautiful blue sconces and enormous blue vases adorned with sweets in golden candy wrappers, for instance, were purposelessly scattered hither and thither and fitted nothing but the ambitions of the hosts.

It was challenging for me to come to this house, feeling my own heartbeat in my ears. Some of the guys had already come, others were late. I was disillusioned and vexed: C wasn't there. I don't know why, but I thought she'd be in a jean jacket, sneakers and a T-shirt. I didn't want to see her undressed, with a floury apron and her hair hastily gathered up into a bun like all women did in the town when their husbands caroused with their buddies at home. To disguise my tension, I pretended to be indifferent, but who cared? That trifling and the awkward grimaces made me nauseous. I never took part in things like that, was peacocking, as they'd think then, but I had got too many things to see to. Toasts were raised one after another and there was not a single girl at the table. I knew there was no chance for C to appear. I didn't drink much. I wasn't tipsy and eventually got absolutely disappointed. Then I decided to sneak out, fully confident that none of the trifling guys would notice my disappearance. I went down the street in the dark and, unwilling to go home, walked twice around the square. Then I decided to go to the bar... Then I changed my mind and walked another circle around the same square. My head was aching and my heart was heavy. In Telavi one can be at his ease only when he's alone. Walking along the familiar streets, beaten a hundred times, you become imbued with a sense of melancholy and realize how monotonous your thoughts are, monotonous, sluggish and inanimate. Even your dreams can be monotonous here.

There was Karapeta's Store on the opposite side of the postoffice. In 1990s, when state assets were sold, those who worked at different stores privatized them.

In Telavi a spade is called a spade. Telavi is like eternity: Things do change, but in the end nothing changes. The Communists changed things, destroying and constructing the town, opening stores and giving them certain numbers, but Telavi offered no resistance to their attempts. Quietly witnessing the changeover, it didn't change.

Once you met Karapeta, you'd remember him for long. He left the scene of trouble a long time ago, but everyone still calls his store Karapeta's Store, though now it's owned by two women who personally knew Karapeta and who are always dressed in black. They need neither signboards nor ads, always selling over the counter at Karapeta's Store. Telavi calls things the way it sees them and that's it! There's no way out!

Near to Karapeta's Store you'll find Lida's Shop and two adjacent shops called the Sisters' Shop, at the corner of the street with the tennis court. They both are small and narrow.

There is a café on one side of the Sisters' Shop. When it was set up, some red Coca-Cola umbrellas were brought out and a fluorescent promotional sign of cheap Hollywood cigarettes was put up. Back then,

people of modest means used to smoke them. Even schoolchildren were reluctant to smoke Hollywood cigarettes which were dry and could burn your throat.

Everyone enjoyed visiting that café. Sitting under one of its umbrellas, you could see everyone and could be seen by everyone. Yes, the café was called Hollywood too, not because of the fluorescent promotional sign, but because of the lambent and innocent local humor. Why, to see everybody and to be seen by everybody... quite a Hollywood! Then they put up a fluorescent sign of Lucky Strike, but the café was still called Hollywood. Then it was seven times reconstructed, but the name was never changed, Hollywood forever... Yes, this is Telavi: It never changes, never changing anything about it.

Well, I stopped at Karapeta's Store and bought a pack of cigarettes. Standing outside the store, I opened the pack and tried to light a cigarette several times but failed. When I finally managed to light my cigarette and took a puff at it, somebody put palms on my eyes from behind and blinded me. A guess-who game of my childhood... I knew it was a woman, someone I knew very well. Oh, that airy fragrance of the hand cream and the soft palms... I recited all the names of the girls who could take such liberties with me and I failed with each name. She obstinately refused to say yes and giggled coquettishly. I thought that she was mistaken, that she'd taken me for somebody else. I freed myself from her hands, turned to her, and gasped... It was C, standing and smiling in a sincere and childish, cheerful and coquettish way. She was glad to see me, glad and stealthily challenging... I knew she was aFemme Fatale.

"How are you, Note?" she asked with incredible naturalness.

"Not bad, C. What about you?" Oh, how it pained me to speak: I knew I'd lost. She'd taken me aback.