

Gurian Diaries

The Gurian Way of Love

It looks like it's morning. It's snowing.

It always bugged me when people have tea with bread and butter in the mornings. I don't know why, I suppose it's the fault of my early and unspeakable childhood but I can't stand the way they do that, so calmly. It's completely beyond me! Perhaps I should skip breakfast now as well. No work today, coz, as they say, it's the weekend. Stuff the weekend! I take after my grandmother but she took off pretty smartly. Okay, I have to start writing.

In Guria, sex is known as 'ajibakuri'. That looks like a pretty convoluted word. It sounds suspicious. But as for love, well, love is love. It could be called a mind-bender but that means something else. I am not going to tell you about it now. You can look it up in the Gurian dictionary.

Another word for sex in the Gurian dialect is 'mai', meaning 'that something'. This word can be traced back to 'maia' meaning 'illusion' in Sanskrit. But you know, you could argue that this something is nothing but this, that and the other. Carry on arguing...

'Well, then, tell us the story of your wedding.'

'Let's begin with the fact that I was fixed up with a girl. After going out for a bit, we agreed to get married. We got to the stage when we set a date for the wedding. That was a done deal in Tbilisi. But the day before we came to Guria, my old fiancée tells me she can't get spliced. I asked why not. Geno, she says, I'm not what you think I am ...'

'But you must have had some relations with her before that, surely?'

'Yeah, we went out, but not like those crazy lovebirds you get nowadays. And, besides, I was getting on, I was about thirty five years old. She was around the same age. When I asked her again 'what's all that about?' she repeated, 'Geno, I am not the sort of girl you think I am.' This time it didn't take me long to guess what she was on about. Everything was ready for the wedding day. All this happened on Friday, the day before.

The wedding reception was all planned.

They'd set out tables for three hundred guests. When my cousin found out that my ex-fiancée refused to marry me, guess what he did? Well, he ... he introduced me to my present wife. He didn't tell her I'd been jilted but he told her that I'd been conscripted into the army, and if she married me I wouldn't have to join up.'

'So it was possible you'd end up with a wedding without a bride?'

'Yes, something like that if it wasn't for my cousin. And my wife behaved honourably, she trusted my cousin, and after much persuasion, she agreed to marry me.'

'After knowing you for just a day?'

'We went to her place on the Friday and she must have liked the look of me. At least, she didn't say outright, 'no way'.'

‘So that means the wedding took place as planned, but with a different bride.’

‘Yup, the wedding happened on the day it was planned for, and, yes, there was a different bride.’

‘Have you seen your old fiancée since then?’

‘No, I haven’t been in contact with her. Oh, no, actually, I did see her once on the Zugdidi bus. I didn’t pay acknowledge her, and nor did she pay any attention to me and she disappeared like history. As for my wife, thank God she trusted me, and I trusted her and since then we’ve been together for forty years.’

‘Do you have that song, ‘Zima’, about winter, by that Russian girl, Alsu? You don’t know it? What have you got that’s the same kind of thing? To dance to like a tango?’ Jambulia asked.

He’s the one who’s always got a bloodshot eye. He didn’t really mean tango. Jambulia was talking about any dance that involves people clinging to each other. I mean, slow dances. He just couldn’t come up with any other name for those kinds of dances. It was that kind of tired autumnal weather with gloomy rain for the wedding. A table for two hundred people had been laid out under a long gazebo. It was muddy and there were still puddles under the chairs. The cold cut us to the bone. To put it briefly, even if you were just looking at a picture showing such weather and the environment around it, it would give you toothache. Anyway, the wedding went ahead with all its customs and ceremony. Some people didn’t have toothache but their teeth chattered in expectation of ‘khashlama’, a lamb dish with rice. Only one man needed his teeth for such a special occasion. He was holding on to his soul so it wouldn’t fly out of his mouth. He was the grandfather of the bridegroom, Nodara, the bridegroom. He was dying. But they couldn’t postpone the wedding so they hid him in a small room in a typical Gurian hut. He bore it stoically like a hero and two weeks after the wedding feast, the family had to prepare the tables for the wake. Those of us who describe Gurian weddings have also seen such occasions.

Nowadays, most men and women have a wedding in the European style, but the old customs aren’t forgotten either. This might be an arranged marriage, or introducing a girl to a boy at somebody’s wake or vice versa, and especially for girls and guys who are well over thirty. And in the past, it was always like that. Especially in the mountains, on top of Gomis Tavi where a wolf used to lie, in the foliage that is so dense it is like an animal’s mane. Here, in the resort Bakhmaro, is where stories from the regions of Guria and Acharia come together in union.

‘How did I get married? How could I forget how I ended up hitched?’

I had an arranged marriage with my wife. As a girl and a boy, we wouldn’t speak to each other but only to our parents. Older people fixed it up. The boy’s father would speak the girl’s father and you weren’t allowed to approach your wife until the wedding was over.

What do you do after when you went over to her? It didn't matter whether you liked the look of her or not. The wedding was done and dusted, so what could you do? I didn't really like her that much, but some women were far worse than her. I thank my lucky stars I didn't end up with them. Even if you didn't like her where could you go? Love? Yeah, I had a childhood sweetheart. Yup, but she married someone else, I married someone else. In the old days, there used to be match-making, but that old tradition is gone.

In the nineties in Guria (and probably in other places too), if husband or wife died and the other half was still alive, the living spouse would be sure to get his or her own name carved on the grave stone too (it's too with being thrifty). There's the date of birth and a dash in expectation of the date of death. It is a strange thing to see. This is what happened in one village: a young widow remarried. Her picture remained on the grave stone of her previous husband. Nobody removed it because in Guria, love is capacious and strange.

'I came here from the sticks in order to married, from the high mountains. You see, lovie, I came all the way here on foot and went to the main town of the region, to the centre. It was a terribly difficult journey. My brother-in-law accompanied me. I had one suitcase with one towel in it, nothing else. We were dirt poor and it was equally poor where we ended up. Now, how did I meet my husband? I graduated from the technical college; I wasn't daft at all, was I? I worked in Khidistavi. We're walking along, me and my girl friend too, we are walking in the main town of the region. There were no modern cars or lorries back then. My husband, bless his cotton socks, was a craftsman. He made balustrades and did repairs, and he had a good eye, the poor old soul. Mary, my friend, worked in the post office, where he was working. So we bump into him as we went on our way. I'm asking her, 'Hey, Mary, who was that? Tell me, girl, who's that curly haired guy?' She replied, 'Tsitsina, you've got no idea what kind of a guy he is!' Well, that was that ... then once again, I was walking through the centre of town, I had to pay in some money or something like that, because I worked in a shop. There I am, walking along the road and there he is, working again. He looked at me and I looked at him too, and we made such impression on each other that everything just kicked off. There was no match making, I married for love. But my sister got married by match making.'

One of the most mystical acts is making moonshine at the edge of the gorge on a cloudy evening - red soil, a pan for distilling vodka, an opaque twenty litre jar and mud. If you have to remember anything about people getting together in Guria, this is one to bear in mind, and here's another one to remember, working all together sorting out maize or hazelnuts on autumn nights, raucous conversation and the astonishing thin air and a seemingly transparent moon. Every time you breathe in there are different colours. It

feels like a sign that something massive is coming to an end, it's unexpected and doomed, but with an exquisite lightness after unbearable pain. I've been in love several times. At that time and afterwards too. Every time was accompanied by sorrow and drama. It's hard to imagine me in that role because of my appearance and behaviour. When love was ending, I'd get a sensation of cold, thin and transparent mid-autumn weather with light nights, the smell of maize and sounds of rustling, settling in me. Romantic and sentimental, just like that. But there's a third occasion too when people gather, with special generator to power a tiny television in order to watch South American soap operas. That's where you would have seen angels of love and cupid, especially in the erotic scenes. Women crying out, making their husbands frown slightly and give sidelong looks. Husbands have more freedom from this point of view. 'Phwoar, what a woman that Monika is!' 'Couldn't get any better,' the braver men would exclaim. But those faces that were expressionless were the more interesting. They sat on low carved stools and watched, fixated with slightly watery eyes, the faraway life of Brazil or Venezuela, looking a bit like lamas gazing into space, at somewhere very distant, everything over yonder. After that they would go home, switch on the lamp and go to bed. Perhaps they lay there for a while with their slightly watery eyes still open. There is something sad about this little corner of the world, there's no irony here. There's more sadness there than in the poems we write nowadays.

'I was very fussy. I did not speak to just anyone. If I spoke to somebody today then I didn't want to speak to them tomorrow. I wouldn't go on a date with him. And so, with all this fussing around I turned forty. Then I said, no one would want me now, and turned away and gave up hope. So, I was on my own and one day, it was in January, an elderly woman came round. Apparently, my mother and these people had been writing to each other and agreed, let's do the deal in secret. I didn't know anything about it. And one day that woman arrived. The woman came in. She came in and what a woman she was! People gathered round to look. The woman said, 'I'll go home and then let you know everything.' That woman looked me up and down and I laughed, I mean, I had nothing to cry about. She saw my teeth and she said he would marry me because of my teeth. Then she left. Then they phoned to say that they were getting everything ready on their side and that I should be prepared on our side. But still I know nothing about it. So, they came. My mother said, she is your mother-in-law-to-be. I thought to myself, what could I do, how could I run away from her. But deep down in my heart I liked her, she was a good woman. They came and brought along the bridegroom. That woman said, 'My son goes nuts when he drinks, he goes up the wall.' I couldn't imagine how he could possibly go up the wall.