

HERSELF

THE ROTATING DISC, PARNASSUS APOLLOS AND THE JACKSONS

During the last week I have felt like LaToya Jackson, the one who has the super star brother; his not talented sister who perpetually undermined the aspirations of the 80's.

Day One:

We arrived in Racha, the village of Tsola... a wooden house, locked and hardly furnished. There were six of us. We split up the work and started to clean the rooms and garden.

Quite honestly, I really have no idea why people connect past experiences with current situations, but being surrounded by these mountains I remember one specific time and story.

The war had just ended. Our mentality was changing... It was extremely difficult and very expensive to call abroad since more than one million people had left the country.

My friend told me that I would now have to call "out" frequently and he would show me the place where I could make calls at half-price. He pointed toward a private house on Ateni Street, where a lady had an "illegal hotline" and the residents left on this side of the border could call abroad.

The waiting area looked similar to a Soviet style foyer; a few chairs, armchairs and a coffee table. At that time only houses in two of the city quarters had the luxury of central heating and this house was one of them. Everyone was waiting; men, women and youngsters, all who wanted to call.

Unexpectedly, the door on my left opened and a middle-aged woman came out and announced: "America callers later on. Germany come in." Her name was Naniko, the owner and switchboard lady, over forty, curled hair and nicely dressed.

Usually the first time is probably hard for everyone. The number of people around makes one feel uncomfortable and I was no exception. I wanted to ask what I was to do, but that thought was interrupted by two men gesturing me to an armchair. I sighed with relief, sat down and found myself staring at the wall.

"I am afraid of water," one of them said, looking at me. Confused, I smiled back.

"Oh, me too, I can't get into the water without a life-saver," added the other. I guessed that they were close, in their late thirties, fashionably dressed and sociable. One of them had long hair.

"Also I have this chronic shoulder problem," the former continued.

“Oh, yeah, you do... you remember once how you sneezed and it dislocated.” They both burst into laughter.

It was then that I sensed something unusual. They smiled at me. One of them introduced himself, “I am Irakli.”

“I am Duda,” the second said.

I am not good at connecting with strangers, that’s why I had a smile painted on my face. My only wish was to learn the method which would help me to call “out.”

Irakli and Duda, squeezed in one armchair together, were talking to two ladies sitting opposite.

“So, we all are in a dream state getting ready for some radical changes,” Irakli said feeling strong and self-assured. He glanced around the room. I became slightly nervous. I thought that if they started speaking about politics without stopping, how should I interrupt the conversation to ask one simple question: “How can I get myself on the telephone waiting list?”

Shush, shush, shush came from some women in the room. There was an aesthetic plastique about the movement of heads turning both left and right simultaneously as if it were some kind of musical.

“You are too self-confident, aren’t you?” Duda retorted awry to Irakli. Irakli replied softly, with his hand sliding through Duda’s hair like Socrates’ in the *Phaedo*.

“Was I ever wrong?”

“Heraclitus also stated that the world would be vanquished by fire, but he himself died of dehydration.” To this day I don’t know how these words slipped out, I only realized it was me when everyone was gazing and I blushed. Astonished, Irakli and Duda’s eyes looked deeply into my heart and with that, I sensed they had granted membership to me.

Day Two:

We are getting tired. We light the fire and heat water. We cut the grass in the yard. We wash fruit and dishes in the spring further away from the house.

So the disc rotating started. On the first day they showed me how it’s usually done. Because of the cold and darkness and the possibility of robbers around, we walked near the houses in organized groups. Our group consisted of Aunt Maya, Duda, Irakli, Tamriko and me.

Tamriko often calls her children in England. She has two sons and always talks about

them.

“The youngest was off in his own world. He would listen to music non-stop. When his grandpa bought him a taperecorder, that was it. We never saw him out-side anymore. He would listen to some radio station, Monte Carlo, which broad-casts from Beirut in Arabic. It had a hitparade once a week. He was likely to kill us for magazine Rovestnik¹. Remember that? That youngster is quite an individual, but still gentle and obedient. Not his elder brother though! Oh boy, he tortured me. If military call up had come, he would have gone into the army. Imagine our devastation. We were lucky that the military recruiting office on Mitskevich Street burnt down and most of the documents were destroyed and no one remembered my Bakuri. We were so happy! Guess what happened next? That idiot had an ar-gument with his girlfriend and to teach her a lesson, he enlisted himself in the army. I was constantly nervous. He travelled with the army covering all the roads in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and the cities of Samarqand and Bukhara. It turned him into a serious man and unexpectedly my children became very close. Both brothers decided to get into music and play their guitars all the time.”

Tamriko sometimes would have tears in her eyes. Although plump, but dressed very nicely, she hid her face trying not to show her emotions. Then Tamriko would open her bag and give us chocolate treats. It was in those moments that Duda would ease her feelings.

“Aunt Tamriko, didn’t they have a rockband?”

“Oh boy, don’t tell me! They did all that stuff, they would say, “We are off to a club. We are off to the countryside...” Once they were on their motorbike and they told me that Zviad asked them to visit him at the Kolkhetian Castle², saying that we should support the Georgian rock movement. I thought everyone had gone crazy.”

¹ Popular Russian weekly magazine for teenagers.

² Residence of Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1939-1994).

“Oh yeah! Maybe she thinks that she is an old, awkward klutz,” snapped Irakli.

“Oh stop it!” I was sorry for the child.

“Ok, but tell me, what is this?” said Irakli pointing at the dress of his puzzled little girl.

Irakli had his three-year-old daughter on his lap. Both Irakli and Dudas’ wives had gone to America to work. These strange friends were always joking around, making up their own

rules to play their game. I patted his little girl's head and said I loved her dress.

Irakli said, "Just look what her mother is buying for her!"

"Well, perhaps she thinks that she's bigger than she is," said Duda.

Day Three:

A lot of hard work everyday to live here. We go to bed early.

Maya left the switchboardroom. She removed her glasses, dried her tears and joined us.

"So what did he say?" asked Tamriko.

"Well, he's seen that man and has started work... a nice theatre. He's a guard there. Right now that's how it is!"

As Maya was speaking, she seemed pretty balanced. She usually was very emotional. She always laughed at herself that when she didn't see the children in the room, she never went first to the toilet or kitchen to check on them, but rushed to the balcony screaming. She adored her husband and she would talk about his achievements at work; how he had once traveled around the world; how he had gone to Cuba and met Fidel Castro personally; to Kenya and Jordan... he was crazy about Jordan. Even taxi drivers never cheat there, not to mention ordinary people. He was keen on biology since childhood.

"Honestly, Tamriko, I swear, his mother told me that he had made an ant climb up onto his hand and would watch it for hours. Then he became interested in the order of life. One time he insisted that there are leopards in Georgia, his guests disagreed and he threw them out of the house."

"How old is he now?" Irakli said, joining the conversation.

"Forty-six," Maya said in Russian starting to chew a gum with her front teeth, a little on the side.

I kept silent and thought about some silly stuff, like why some people say phone-numbers, age and football scores in Russian, but basketball scores in Georgian?

"Maya, you said Nantes... or something?"

"Nancy. He is in Nancy now. Mamuka once met this man, Tojman, who is head of the Manufacture Theater at some conference in France. They kept in touch and became friends. Anyway, that man helped him. Well, I don't know Tamriko; something will come out of it... factory in the morning, nightshift at the theater. What can I do, that's what he wanted."

"Imagine if she were to take out a copy of *Le Petit Prince* as well ..." muttered Duda as a female student entered the room. "So what?" I asked.

"Irakli and I collected some statistics while sitting around here; what could we do in the last three months. So, we've found out that every fourth person brings this book. It's in

Russian. “

“Perhaps this is the country of princesses and that’s why!” I couldn’t help smiling.

“Good, if they really do read,” said Maya, “By the way, there is no Exupery Museum in France, while the Tokyo Exupery Museum has millions of visitors every year. Mamuka told me that.”

“Sure, the Japanese especially love Exupery,” Duda joined in. “Why?”

“That’s the country of the Samurai and they see a fighter in Antoine.”

“Do you happen to know that the original illustrations are lost? Yeah, Ma-muka once met Exupery’s grandnephew. He has all the rights. His name is Olivier, I think. He told Mamuka that supposedly all those pictures are in America.”

“Aren’t those Americans such boors!” Tamriko became angry.

“Apparently, Olivier said that the book had been translated into one hundred and twenty languages and it seems now that the Little Prince is not French at all.”

Irakli and Duda were whispering. The little girl was crying.

Day Four:

We lie in the hammock and read... We bathe under the open sky in a bath made by the boys. It feels good. Hey look, Parnassus Apollo! This butterfly is com-mon in the high mountains of Georgia. Seems it flies in Racha, too!

They had a sale at the California Express store. Duda and I went and we both bought “Naf Naf” jackets. I bought a red one and he got brown. We became good friends, although it’s strange because it’s difficult for me to make that kind of con-nection. As much as he tried, he could not make me say to whom I was calling “out.” He knew that I was sixteen.

“You know, I have this habit. I observe smokers and it’s strange since I don’t smoke (he said hundreds of times, if you smoke, don’t be shy with me!). I remem ber how smokers inhale, but have never been able to recollect how they exhale,” and Duda cupped his hand over his mouth.

I really didn’t know if he wanted to emphasize his words with this gesture, or what! And after all, I have no idea what kind of relationship Duda and Irakli have! They are close friends; their wives are friends, too, and work in America. And these two sit squeezed together in one armchair...

On our way, we bought some gifts. New Year was almost upon us and we bought some souvenirs for our favorites at the phony post-office.

“You’re sorry for Tamriko aren’t you?” Duda unexpectedly said, “You look at her in a

certain way ...”

“Well, yeah...” I replied briskly.

“I am more sorry for Maya, though. I see how much she loves her husband. She’s always calling him “My Mamuka” but she also has a lot of dignity. I feel sorry for those kinds of people; they can never show their emotions.”

“And aren’t you poor as well?” I told him straight out.

Duda bowed, drawing on his cigarette and exhaling the smoke out of his nose. I had also taught myself observation and will never forget the smoke that covered Duda’s face completely... Lost, he could not come to terms with getting older and still dressed like a young boy trying to find a common ground with people much younger.

Day Five:

The whole night we kept warding off bats and chipmunks.

Bottles of champagne and Gozinaki¹ were laid out on Naniko’s table. There were greetings, hugs and kisses and the exchange of gifts. On New Year’s Day morning everyone was sleepless, loving and happy.

As soon as the alcohol started its effect on Tamriko she would talk about her boys. What else could she do?

“When their two friends went to Liverpool, I knew that they would want leave, too, but how? We didn’t have the money to buy tickets. Anyway, what would they

¹Cookie made of chopped walnut and honey, traditionally for New Year.

do there? One day, our neighbour came by and said the lottery wants to make a commercial and they are willing to pay. My boys made a good commercial, but they delayed the payment.”

“So, didn’t your boys beat them up?” Irakli interrupted.

“Oh, I was so scared about that. They both went down to the office. Imagine it; those lottery people all packing up and leaving...”

“For where?” It was my only question that day. “Just escaping.”

“Then...?”

“In short, they thought they’d rather avoid trouble and leave quickly. They grabbed a big bag saying, here take it. That’s much more than we owe you. It’s all yours.”

“That’s an unbelievable story,” said Irakli, and poured champagne.

“I swear, there was so much money, not only did my boys and their buddies get tickets,

but they each got \$500 on top of that.”

As Maya left the switchboard room she said Tojman had invited Mamuka to Paris. They were going to celebrate the New Year at a restaurant. He went by train. The scenery appeared to be so beautiful, yellow flowers everywhere, with those summer houses and little cottages along the road. As she spoke, Maya approached the table. She was nervous and fidgety. Irakli poured champagne and offered the glass.

“America’s on the line! Whose call is it?” Naniko yelled out from the room. “Duda, it’s your turn,” Irakli pushed his friend.

“You take my place,” Duda smiled at me.

There was something genuinely likeable about this person. Back then I thought that I would probably meet him again somewhere else.

As I was entering the phone room, I heard them make a toast to love. They invited Naniko to the table. That day was the first time I was alone in this mystical room. The phone was in the center. I kissed that little phone dearly.

Day Six:

We argue. We cannot restrain ourselves.

The mountains do have an influence over people who feel bad.

The house on Ateni Street spread gloomy feelings little by little. I was a bit bored of listening to endless stories about Tamriko’s sons playing music on the streets of Lon-don and making nine pounds to buy four kilos of potatoes. They alternately cut round shapes in the morning and thin shapes in the afternoon so that their meals had variety.

I also got tired with the romantic stories of Maya and Mamuka, and how they laughed about the car lights shining on them in bed when they were newlyweds:

“Look at the reflection of the lights on you. Now it’s on your legs! And now on your face! Definitely a Mercedes.”

I was fed up by watching scenes of Irakli and Duda’s latent feelings and the humiliation of the little three-year-old girl dressed by her dad with such a lack of taste. Every time I’d come, I would grab any magazine or book on the coffee table and start reading.

One of my grabs resulted in the Tianeti¹ telephone directory. The 1993 edition had the following in bold letters:

Prohibited:

No knocking the phone.

No dialing with pencil or other object. Speeding or delaying the dialing.

After that, I looked at the list of subscribers of Lower Tianeti. I glanced down the listings; this is what I remember: Pirqushashvili², Davit; Kbiltsetskhlashvili, Murad; Paraskevovi, Temur; Nabijashvili, Valiko; Khispekhashvili, Sezona.

They made her sit and calmed her down. Everyone thought something bad had happened... maybe he had died. I thought of Mamuka, but Maya would have preferred Mamuka dead than him cheating on her. A Russian woman had answered the phone and announced "I am his mistress."

Irakli saw Maya out... Then Tamriko's turn came and she went into the room. Duda and I were alone now.

¹Town in east-central Georgia.

² Here the author lists first and last names and their etymological origin is somewhat comical. A rough translation might be: Rustimouthson, Davit; Murad Burningteeth, Valiko Steppingson, Temur Fridayson, Season Woodenleg. In Georgian they solicit a smile.

"What is Irakli's wife doing in America?" I asked Duda. "She works as an interpreter for the police."

"What's she translating?"

I was surprised.

"Well, you know, sometimes Georgians get arrested, so she translates..." "So, the more Georgians get arrested, the better for her?"

"Yeah, and the more awkward clunky dresses for little Anna," we laughed. "And what about your wife...?"

"She works as a driver for the 1969 Miss New Orleans. It's true," he giggled. "Is that Miss an old hippie?"

"No, they revert back to mainstream quickly... I mean some hippies..." "Sure, they change, but their attitude is still young..."

"You know what I just remembered? When we graduated from school, we travelled to Bulgaria. Next to a discotheque there was some amusement arcade. You'd stand like this, put your hands out, and then a computer would calculate your age based on your mood. It would tell how old you actually feel."

“So...?”

“We all got from sixty to seventy years.”

“Why? Was anything wrong with the computer?”

“No, other tourists got twenty to twenty five. Those were the figures.” Duda looked into my eyes for a long time. I got a bit confused. He did, too.

“They shot a clip and one studio liked it very much.” Suddenly Tamriko appeared in front of us.

“You mean your boys?” Duda, embarrassed, asked awkwardly. “Yeah, and the youngest recorded an interview with a very famous singer and they got a very high price for it. The eldest is going to start university...” Tamriko’s voice began to tremble. She grabbed her bag and left.

“ Ah, well...” Duda sighed heavily.

We did not talk much on our way home. I sure didn’t know what shoulder-dislocated Duda was thinking. But I knew for sure that neither of Tamriko’s sons, nor Maya’s husband Mamuka would ever return. Nor would Duda and Irakli’s wives ever return. No one. I was approaching my house in tears and I lacked the experience to lighten the load of this unbearable existence.

I did not want to watch the fate of scores of people flailing around and out of control on the first floor of the only warm and heated house; in some phony post office. I didn’t want to knock on the phone, or rotate the disc ... I didn’t want to believe that, at the cost of those heartbroken people, money was about to flow into this country, thanks to the dollars of new emigrants.. I didn’t want that! This feeling was so strong that I’d have the same feeling even if I were dying, because the pain I suffered was excruciating! I was the only one who had had a real love story, with its illusions and allusions. It died right there in my hands, like a Parnassus Apollo butterfly, quick and abruptly. He changed the phone number, never letting me have the new one. I did still visit the pseudo post-office, not giving any reason for doubt to Duda and Irakli, Tamriko, Maya, and Naniko. I wanted to catch cholera or attend an Eteri Mgaloblishvili’s concert; listen to Flemish-French organ music and quickly, very quickly, get very old... Yeah! That’s what I wanted! I wanted to see the house on Ateni Street destroyed and this whole crumbling network finished. I marched up Arakishvili Street to the local police station and filed this complaint:

“This house number such and such on Ateni Street illegally exploits the tel-ephone line.” Everyone is relieved! That was the end to this endless and monotonous story!

Day Seven

Evening. As some of my colleagues would say, a Racha evening. We will have tea. Now I realize: The interior of the house reminds me of a Chekhov play where we are performing in our own separate spaces with its setting being transposed to a Georgian stage: stiff shoulders and exaggerated evaluations.

I - If I lived in the village, I'd have many cotton dresses.

Toma – If I lived in the village, I'd be a hunter.

Reziko – If I lived in the village, I'd be a wanker.

Tusia – If I lived in the village, I'd be a village fortuneteller.

Teeka – If I lived in the village, I'd be a village whore.

Sandro – If I lived in the village, I'd move to live in Tbilisi.

Now time has passed. It's 12 o'clock in the afternoon. I am luxuriating in bed. I am LaToya... It's a fact, ninety percent of the people living in this city feel like those four brothers of Michael Jackson. For a long time no one has heard anything about them in this city. Once they also had been talented ... and now what?