

ME, MARGARITA

There's a gorge, a very beautiful one, that probably everyone in Georgia has visited at one time or another. During the last century, it changed hands many times. First, a Sultan got hold of it, then some Persians, and, after that, the Turks again. Later, Pask-evitch invaded Akhaltsikhe, which was under the governance of the Ottomans, and claimed the gorge as the property of Russia.

The Georgian princes sold it on the spot.

It was during the period of Russian rule that some lucky person discovered the natural mineral waters there. A few years later, the Georgian Grenadiers cleared a path through the thick forest to the springs. They put up some pretty buildings and, very soon, the gorge became full of life, attracting many visitors.

In 1871, the area came under the rule of the Supreme Governor, Mikhail Nikolaevitch, and, however ridiculous it sounds, I must thank whoever handed it over for providing my ancestors with an identity. Everyone around me seems to know what their grandfathers' fathers were called, but I don't. I only know that Supreme Governor Mikhail Nikolaevich was ultimately—if involuntarily—responsible for my birth. Without him, Mikhail-Gavriil would never have got a job pouring mineral water into bottles, and nor would plump Tantsia have gone to the springs to sell her pies. And nor would the two of them have been able to communicate with each other, as they would not have had Russian as their common language.

1.

Although nearly forty years had passed since the Supreme Governor first appeared in the area, his story hadn't been forgotten in the gorge. The palace certainly remained; the narrow gorge was called Prince's Water; two men were known as the Great Princes, and a little girl was given the nickname 'Tantsia.' The name means 'dance' in Russian, but she wasn't called that because of the dances and entertainment that occurred at that time. She was in fact named in honour of the Great Prince's arrival at the railway station, where there was a sign saying 'station,' the Russian for which sounds a bit like 'Tantsia.'

Tantsia was raised by local aristocrats in their own household. No one knows why. She may have been an orphan, or perhaps her mother was a housemaid. The main thing is that she was brought up properly and that's why she was able to read and write. She could speak

a little Russian, which in that village was a big deal. In addition, these aristocrats gave Tantsia their surname, and when she got married, provided a dowry. That was an act of great generosity, especially at that time, when even the gentry were shamefully impoverished.

Tantsia was beautiful, petite, fair-haired, with large breasts; and, for a poor woman, unusually proud.

She was always neatly dressed, and, when the sun was scorching hot, she would wear a scarf over her face to avoid getting burned and damaging her skin.

She kept her house in a similar fashion. It was cosy and polished like a new penny. She was very proud of her house and particularly of her sofa. She covered it with a rug that had the date '1910' stitched in one corner. It had been given to her by Lady Margarita as a wedding present. Tantsia constantly told people that the rug had been woven especially for her. The thing is, though, the date was a bit of a give-away. It was neither the year of her birth, nor the year of her marriage. She would have been three or four years old by then, so who knows who this rug was originally woven for.

The main thing is that, at the time when our story begins, the rug, along with propaganda posters for collective farms, adorned the tiny house where Tantsia lived alone. She was widowed but nevertheless was as proud and plump as she was in the old days. It wasn't for nothing that they said in the gorge that Tantsia was a true lady, like one painted in a portrait.

The man to whom Tantsia had been married at one stage had problems. No, he wasn't particularly poor, it was just that, embarrassingly, his manhood was often whispered about. Besides, he was a thief. He stole and didn't care what. It could be a pumpkin hanging on a neighbour's fence, or mineral water in a dark green bottle. Such water was so abundant in that area, no one knew what to do with it; in fact generally there wasn't much worth stealing around there. But he stole anyway, and after he'd done it, that night he'd feel remorseful. He would sit on the sofa and wake up poor Tantsia. She would hastily light the flickering oil lamp and he would begin his repentance by wailing and keening. Of course, he didn't possess an icon, so he wailed at the posters with their images of newly grown pumpkins, thick-legged women and the slogan, 'The Anniversary of the Patronage of the Fleet by the Regional Committee of Young Communists,' only he didn't know what that meant. It was also a difficult phrase for Tantsia to understand.

The next day, he would steal again. Sometimes, he got caught and was beaten up. At other times, he got away with it; either way, he would wail at night. One day he was caught red-handed in a hut where someone was storing millet, and it seems they thrashed him with excessive violence. He was found at dawn, dead near Prince's Water. In fact, it wasn't the beating that killed him, although no one really knows what caused his death. They buried him near the oak trees where, in pre-Soviet times, there'd been a blue wooden church with a golden dome. Lady Margarita used to say that the church was dedicated to her angel, but no one knows whether or not that was really true.

So, that's how Tantsia came to be widowed and left alone. She mourned for a while—after all, that's what widows usually do—and then she went back to living as before.

On the whole, Tantsia wasn't a worrier. She wasn't bothered by the Revolution, nor by the Great War, nor the Second World War.

During those years, nothing much changed in her life. The aristocrats moved away into town, and afterwards they disappeared somewhere. Only Lady Margarita, or Lord Margalita as Tantsia called her, still came in the summer. There weren't many men left in the village, but Tantsia never thought about that. She was interested neither in village life, nor in men. Her world was a tiny one, limited to the gorge itself: for her that was quite sufficient.

Later, when the Second World War was over, holidaymakers started coming to the springs, foreign faces appeared and new opportunities for work materialised—men were given jobs bottling the mineral water and women started selling and exchanging all kinds of small things. Tantsia got involved as well. Every other day, she would put pies made out of potatoes into Lord Margalita's basket, cover them with an embroidered handkerchief, hang the basket on her arm and mince off to the waters. She didn't do it to earn money but in order to mingle with people. If you asked her in the evening what she was doing at the waters, she probably wouldn't be able to tell you, she wouldn't remember.

She simply went there and that was that.

Once, when Tantsia 'simply went there,' something happened. It was only afterwards that she wondered whether the consequences were ultimately good or bad. At the time, she only

understood that something had happened. She hadn't yet reached the waters when she slipped on the hillside and fell over, in precisely a man-ner inappropriate for a woman like her, that's to say, awkwardly. The worse thing was that everyone, both locals and outsiders, was watching her. She was so flustered that it was only later that she noticed what bad luck she'd had: the handle of the basket had come off and her beautiful pies were scattered all over the road.

Of course, people rushed towards her, expressing their con-cern all over the place. Tantsia smiled, embarrassed, and tried to hide her mud-covered hands. The problem was she didn't know what to do with the basket and the pies, so she decided to behave as befits a woman brought up by aristocrats; in other words, she abandoned them. She put the damaged pies back into the basket, and although she felt regretful, she left the basket at the side of the road. Then she shook out the handkerchief, tucked it up her sleeve and went home, strolling along ever so casually. But she felt self-conscious: she was able to walk more gracefully when she was carrying the basket.

To put it in a nutshell, something had happened that Tantsia couldn't forget. At the very least, she no longer had a basket, so she couldn't go to the waters anymore. She certainly couldn't go there awkwardly trying to carry pies in her lap! But this is only the beginning of the story because two days later, someone was calling at her fence.

'Hey, missus!'

It was a man! A stranger! Russian! With hair black as a beetle! With blue, blue eyes! He was holding a basket in his hand, not one like the one she was used to, but woven in a completely dif-ferent style. The man was standing behind the fence, with one hand raised, and he was showing Tantsia the basket.

Tantsia's heart stopped. She couldn't breathe. She didn't know what to do. Should she invite him in? No, it would be unheard of to invite a stranger, especially a man, into the house! So, should she approach him? Oh, dear! But what if she couldn't understand his Russian? Tantsia stood and stared at him with her hand over her mouth.

The man looked at her too. He looked at her, and then put the basket down near the fence and left. He turned his head a few times, but nevertheless, eventually went on his way.

There was something in the basket, covered with mulberry leaves. Tantsia squatted down and removed them. And saw some prunes.

'Who was that man?' wondered Tantsia.

That man was Russian, and, at one stage, he lived in a different land, on the banks of a big river. When he was three days old, he'd been taken to a church and baptised. That was the custom in that country. A child was baptised immediately so that if he or she died, they would be received by God. It would be unheard of to give a Christian burial to anyone who hadn't been baptised!

Of course, the man had been given a name, Gavriil. The thing is, though, his godfather had been totally pissed and his godmother too was just as drunk, and they instantly forgot the child's name.

In order to save face when they got home, they told the parents that their son was called Mikhail.

So, he lived in the world as Mikhail, until the 1930s, when he was one of those to be deported. They pulled out the church register and discovered that he was really Gavriil, not Mikhail.

By that time, Mikhail-Gavriil had lived quite a long life and nothing should have surprised him. But something unexpected happened. Gavriil nearly went insane. He plucked at his beard the whole time and they found it almost impossible to calm him down. To be truthful before Almighty God, he was already a bit crazy, but nobody expected such a reaction from him. I mean, having the wrong name is a big deal; but even so.

Anyway, although he hadn't yet turned forty at the time he learned about his real name, Mikhail had already led an eventful life. If nothing else, he'd served in the First World War and as a very young man, he had been a sergeant major. At first, he was under the command of the Czar's officers, and after that he took orders from the Ministers of Defence in the provisional govern-ment, and after that, the Bolshevik Commissars. To cut a long story short, he was a soldier and a heroic one. He really was. He was awarded the St George Cross four times, in gold and silver, and in all four degrees of merit, as well as a medal for courage.

You would think that would suffice? No one knows what he did to get these medals, he never told anyone, apart from how he was given the most recent one, a St George Cross, which was appar-ently awarded to him for finding the rest of his medals.

At that time, Mikhail was a spy, and when he returned to his dug-out after one of his assignments, he discovered that somehow, on the way back, he'd lost his medals. It was an awful thing to happen but, as I described earlier, Mikhail could sometimes get fixated on unexpected things. That's what happened with the medals, but this time he did his best to put things right and returned to the enemy's quarters and recovered them. And for that particular action, he was awarded his fourth St George Cross. Then, apparently, after the war, some Ukrainian Cossacks near Smolensk managed to rob him of his possessions, all apart from his medals. Mikhail wouldn't part with them for anyone. He would rather lose his soul.

That night, Tantsia couldn't sleep and, in spite of the great plans she'd been making the previous evening, and the neatly packaged pies she'd baked, the next day she hesitated for a long time about whether or not to go to the waters. Her eyes were swollen. But, eventually, she set off.

She wished she had left earlier, in the morning. It was now terribly hot and she was breaking into a sweat. She hoped she wouldn't bump into him straight away. There were fewer people than usual at the upper spring, and she thought she'd have a chance to tidy herself up first.

As soon as she arrived at the waters though, she noticed the man from yesterday. Near the ash tree. He was sitting with his back towards her. 'I think he's eating. What a stroke of luck, he's alone. How tall he is!' He was sitting down but his height was obvious.

Suddenly Tantsia became nervous. Up to now, she'd never had any doubts about her looks. She knew there was no question that she was a gorgeous woman. How could anyone not like her? Now, though, she was uncertain. What if he didn't? She was so much shorter than him and if he stood up he might not see her, so Tantsia decided to seize her chance while he was still seated. She walked round in front of him, and before he could get up, she knelt and put the basket of pies down before him.

'Do you like it?' the man asked her.

'Aye', Tantsia replied. 'Did you make it yourself?'

'Yeah,' said the man and he added something, but Tantsia couldn't make out what he'd said.

Embarrassed, she dragged the basket towards him. 'Eat!'

So that's how Mikhail and Tantsia got to know each other. At first they met one another every second day, as if by accident. They would meet at the springs. Mikhail would be working, bottling water and Tantsia would bring her pies. Mikhail began to give her presents, little things, like wooden spoons, or berries threaded on pieces of grass. As for Tantsia, she began making *khachapuris*, cheese pies, not to sell, but as a way of going to some trouble for Mikhail. She yearned for Mikhail to visit her so she could show him her beautiful house and serve him food, but was too shy to say so. Besides, he worked late and apparently he shared his accommodation with other foreign men. He started work at the crack of dawn so when would he have time?

But then, in the autumn, Mikhail did come to visit her at home, bringing another gift, this time mushrooms wrapped up in a shirt. No one else in the gorge would risk eating such mushrooms, but Tantsia wasn't afraid. She sat down on her sofa and watched Mikhail cook the mushrooms, and afterwards they ate them together, and then Mikhail stayed. That's how it transpired that a man came into Tantsia's life, and into her house.

There must have been a lot of gossip in the gorge. Of course they were gossiping, what would you expect? At first they gossiped, then they became jealous. Then they shut up. Tantsia wasn't bothered by any of it, she was happy. When the weather turned cold and the holidaymakers left, she didn't have to go to the waters either. She waited for her man at home. As for Mikhail, it's true he drank, but only up there with the men. He never showed himself to Tantsia when he was drunk. But it's also true that once, when he was drunk, he got into a vicious fight. He beat someone up and then was badly beaten himself. Nevertheless, he went to

Tantsia, and she was pleased to see him, although it's hard to say why. It was that night Mikhail left his treasure, that's to say his medals, at her place, and Tantsia put them on the mantelpiece.

'My beauty,' Mikhail would say to her, stroking her hair. Tantsia would kiss his hand in response and with bated breath, try to make sense of his story.

She managed to understand some things, such as how, very early on, Mikhail had owned two horses, fast as bullets. They were known as New Bullet and Old Bullet, but the collective

farm confiscated them from him. She also understood that, back then, when he lived along way away, and of course, before Tantsia had met him, he had a wife and seven children. They died on their way to a labour camp. Mikhail then lived alone in a remote and awful place called Sheleska. He didn't have a woman there or anything, but since he could read and write, he was employed as a clerk in a local office. Mikhail told her these stories while stroking her hair, and Tantsia couldn't say anything in response. They couldn't really communicate.

Only once did they have something that might be called a conversation; it was when Mikhail entrusted her with the story about his name.

'Mikhail-Gavriil sounds a bit like Michael-Gabriel,' laughed Tantsia.

'Why are you laughing? They were archangels.'

'The appearance of those angels is a portent of death. As for me, when I was baptised, I was given the baptismal name of the daughter of the household: Margarita. Do you know that "mar-galiti" is Georgian for pearl?'

'So is your name really Margarita?'

'Yes, that's right, what of it?'

'Nothing. You have the same name as my house. It was called Margarita Stantsia.'

One evening Mikhail didn't appear. Tantsia thought he must have got drunk. It was a bitterly cold night and she felt sorry for her man. Who knows, perhaps he'd fallen asleep in the street. Mikhail had told her that once he'd slept out in a frost that was so cold, when he spat, his saliva froze solid in the air. Even so, Tantsia thought that tomorrow she would say to Mikhail, how-ever drunk you may be, come to me anyway, not just because the weather's turned cold, but because there are wild beasts out there, and I don't want any harm to come to you. It took her quite a while to compose this little speech. Then, when she'd practiced it several times, she fell asleep.

Mikhail didn't appear the following day, nor the day after. When she went up to the springs, they informed her that Mikhail and the other men had been taken away. Taken away where? They shrugged their shoulders. Who knows?

To Sheleska! They must have taken him there! It's the most horrible place! Oh dear, Mikhail! And what about your medals?

You've left your medals behind!