

The Squirrel

I

I was eighteen months old when I first started talking. Of course I only know that from what people have told me—I don't remember the momentous day myself. There is, though, a second momentous day that I remember very well indeed. Yesterday. The day I fell silent. Yesterday I realized that my wife Natia and my best friend and business partner Levan were lovers and the power of speech deserted me. My wife Natia once said that she would fall in love with Levan, not me. Wives like to spout annoying things like that—it's how they pay us back for always being late and getting drunk and all the rest. Natia and I have been together for three years. Three years of marriage. Three years of sleeping together: moaning, groaning, heavy panting, a scream and then, covered in sweat, we collapse side by side on the bed. But we haven't got any children yet. We want some, but we haven't got any. This is the major problem in our relationship. Levan is my best friend (disregarding the fact that he's having an affair with Natia, I have no better friend than him—and that is my misfortune) and my business partner, and so of course he knows about our big, big problem. Sometimes we talk about it over lunch. Levan always tells me I should go and see this doctor or that doctor. Once Levan even gave me a list of doctors he'd printed out. Levan doesn't know that Natia and I went to see those doctors long ago and that they found out I was the problem, that the problem's in me . . . although as Levan and Natia are having an affair, Levan probably knows everything after all. Natia probably puts her head on Levan's chest and blurts stuff out. She probably blurts everything out. Until yesterday I was taking special pills and following a special diet. Now I've stopped bothering—what on earth's the point? Levan and Natia are having an affair. Levan and I have known each other since we were children. We used to play soccer and war together; in soccer he was the goalie and in war he was always a Red. In soccer I was a forward and in war I was a German. Sometimes I'd score against Levan and sometimes I couldn't get the ball past him, sometimes in war I killed Levan and sometimes he killed me. Me and Levan were in the same class at school, and after we left Levan went to America and I went to England. We both studied law. While we were away Georgia had its civil wars and a period of reflection, and then heroin, cocaine, and hash arrived, along with nightclubs and saunas. Levan and I came back to Tbilisi at the same time and celebrated our return in a fancy sauna—we drank champagne, wrapped ourselves in dazzling white towels, and walked about like the Romans we'd seen in the movies. We

watched naked women dance for us, and then the same women showed us a bit of affection, and whispered sweet nothings to us as we left. The next day we started work. Levan and I agreed to start a business together. And because we'd followed parallel paths when we started working—Levan in America, me in England—the only real difference was that Levan got paid in dollars and I got paid in pounds. Dollars and pounds. Both easily convertible currencies, and with our savings we opened a law firm. It was right there in the law firm that one fortuitous day I met Natia. She brought her problem along just like anyone else. Levan was out having talks with a major client. Natia told me about her problem, and I said it was something we could sort out for her and told her how much we charged. Natia said our rates were okay and we drew up a contract, shook hands, and smiled at each other. Natia had a lovely smile and so I asked, "Shall we go to the cinema?"

Natia looked slightly confused, slightly cross, slightly embarrassed. "Why?"

I was feeling bold. "Because I really like you."

Natia smiled. Natia had a lovely smile. "Well, okay then, seeing as you've got such a good reason. You've got my number—call me and we can fix a time, draw up a contract if you like. . ." And after a perfectly timed and charmingly executed pause, Natia said, "What kind of films do you like?"

I like British detective series, but didn't think that would strike the right tone, so I lied: "I like art-house."

"Looks like we have similar taste then," Natia said. After we got to know each other better it turned out that Natia doesn't like art-house cinema at all. Natia watches American melodramas.

Just then Levan came back to the office. Nothing much happened. Levan said hello to Natia and sat down at the computer. I walked Natia to the lift. When I got back to the office Levan told me we'd got the major client, and I told Levan that I liked Natia and we were going to the cinema. Levan gave me a few words of advice, as best friends should. Then we went and got drunk.

Three days later Natia and I met up. Natia was late, of course. I was nervous, of course. We saw a really tedious Michelangelo Antonioni film, *Red Desert*, and I caught myself thinking it would have been better to watch modern rubbish rather than this classical nonsense, but I didn't say that to Natia. After the film we went to the nearest café. We ordered coffee, cake, and cognac and talked about various things, some serious and some less

so. And then I answered one of her questions with a lie, and because of that my life changed for two months. For two months I was in a state of panic. “Sandro,” Natia asked me, and I knew from the fact she started with my name that she was going to say something serious. I braced myself. “Do you believe in God?”

And I reasoned to myself that desire is the most important thing in a re-relationship, and that religious people, because their conduct is restricted by the Ten Commandments, experience greater desire than atheists, who are enthusiastic rather than desirous. And because enthusiasm is so ephem-eral, and because I wanted a long relationship with Natia, and because the fundamental basis of a long relationship is desire (this being the rather pathetic train of thought I had back then), I said, “Yes, I do!”

In actual fact I’m neither a believer nor an atheist. I realize that some-thing much more powerful and more perfect than human beings created the universe, of course—I just don’t really think about that stuff anymore. I don’t ask myself who that being is and what he’s asking of me. I’ve got my own problems. I want our law firm to be famous throughout the world, I want shares in our firm sold on the international financial markets, I want to be a famous global expert, and I want Levan as my highly skilled deputy. I’ll ask myself who that being is and what he’s asking of me the minute he starts sorting out my problems for me. I’m not holding my breath.

“Would you like us to start going to church on Sundays?” Natia offered.

I nodded. It was another opportunity to see her. “Let’s do that.”

People who work six days a week need their Sundays for sleep. That lie I answered Natia with robbed me of my Sundays and I started to feel a sense of constant panic. Every Sunday for two months we got up before daybreak so that we wouldn’t be late for church. We were late a few times all the same. But anyway, two months is enough time for a couple to grow really close, so after two months I told Natia I wasn’t going to church anymore.

Natia’s reaction was not what I expected; she shrugged her shoulders and said, “Don’t go then.”

And I stopped going to church. Natia didn’t.

In those two months I learned that the soul exists and that the soul is immortal, that by nature the soul is light, but that with his sins man makes it heavy, and the soul becomes troubled and tormented. At the same time you have routine, and this routine drags you along

so forcefully and turns you and turns you and turns you so much that you forget the soul exists. And you turn and turn and turn and think that you are moving forward. My dream about the international market, my dream about the global financial markets, my dream about becoming known worldwide— apparently it's all nonsense. Well, I don't like that way of thinking. I like a different way of thinking. When I lived in England I made friends with an Indian girl. I was a foreigner there and she was too, both of us representatives of very ancient countries and cultures. The girl was called Estay and one day, when we were sitting in the park watching squirrels run about in the trees, Estay told me that these squirrels might be our ancestors, and we talked for a while about transmigration of the soul. That really appeals to me. I realize that while one lifetime might be enough for me to realize my dreams I won't have time to enjoy them too. I want my soul to transmigrate and for me to be born again, although I don't suppose it's really possible and even thinking about it confuses me.

Then, one fine day, they told us that I was the problem and Natia said to me, "It's because you're a nonbeliever. You're being punished."

"You really think that—"

Natia didn't let me finish. "Yes, I think that—"

Now I didn't let Natia finish. "You really think that God is judge, jury, and executioner, even for something like this?"

Natia shook her head.

"No, I don't think that, I think that God gives man a sign and if man chooses to be blind and stupid then it's his own fault."

"What, so we punish ourselves?"

"Yes." Natia put her arms around my neck. "Just think about it, will you? Please, just think about it."

"I'll think about it," I promised.

And since that day I've thought about it a lot and rather unexpectedly I came to the conclusion that my wife Natia and my best friend and business partner Levan are having an affair. In spite of that I still haven't changed my opinion that something much more powerful and perfect than humans created the universe. Last night I registered a handgun. A Beretta, sixteen rounds.

II

Suspicious always need to be confirmed, whereas if you see something with your own eyes . . . I need to see Natia and Levan together with my own eyes. And so I am forced to break my day-long silence. I say to Natia, “Nati, I’m going to Batumi,” and wait for Natia to ask, “What do you want to go to Batumi for?” so that I can joke, “Well, I can’t go to Sokhumi ‘cause we lost it in the war!” But Natia asks me something completely different: “Is Levan going too?”

“No.”

“When will you be back?”

“In three days.”

I look into Natia’s eyes. “It’s worked out just right for you, hasn’t it?” I think. “You’re happy now, aren’t you? I’m going, Levan’s staying. I’ll be back in three days. Knock yourselves out for three days, why don’t you . . .” And suddenly I see that right before my eyes, them knocking themselves out— they’re doing it, they’re doing it all, pleasuring themselves and each other in every way possible. No. No, those three days aren’t going to happen.

I call Levan. I’m going to Batumi, I tell him, and wait for him to ask me what Natia asked me, only about Natia: Is Natia coming? I answer: no. He’s pleased. Delighted. He asks me when I’m coming back. Three days, I tell him. Quick as a flash, Levan plans those three days in his head. And suddenly Levan’s plans appear right before my eyes. They’re doing it, they’re doing it all, pleasuring themselves and each other in every way possible. No. No, Levan’s plans aren’t going to happen. But Levan asks me something completely different: “What on earth do you want to go to Batumi for?”

Aha, are professional suspicions eating you up, friend? Are they?

“Do you remember the Turks?” I ask.

Levan remembers.

“They’re coming to Batumi and I want to meet up with them, see if I can tie up some kind of international deal.” And after a short pause I ask, “Do you want to come along?”

“No, I’ve got some people here I need to look after. When are you back?”

“Three days.”

The blood rushes around my head and my heart. I repeat Levan’s words to myself— I’ve got some people here I need to look after—and I see those horrors before me once more:

they're doing it, they're doing it all, pleasur-ing themselves and each other in every way possible . . . but no, those three days aren't going to happen.

"Are you going by train?" Levan asks.

"No, I'm flying," I answer automatically.

"Well, have a good flight."

"Thank you." I hang up.

Then I pack my bag, kiss Natia on the forehead, tell her to be good and say good-bye for three days. I go out into the yard and sit in the car. Natia stands on the balcony to wave me off. I put the gun under the seat. You might say I'm sitting on a powder keg. I start the car and actually set off on the road to the airport. I start thinking maybe it's better if my suspi-cions remain just that, that I don't really need to confirm anything or see anything for myself. There's a voice in my head telling me my suspicions are nonsense. There's another voice in my head telling me they're not non-sense at all.

I wander around the airport concourse. I smoke a cigarette and think, and think, and voices in my head tell me different things and I just can't make a final decision. Should I get on the plane? Should I stay here? Maybe it would be better if I went to Batumi. I could have a three-day break, walk along the seashore, listen to the sound of the waves. I look out to sea and the sea calms me, looking out to sea calms me, brings me to my own sea of calm. I go to the ticket desk.

"Are there any tickets left for the Batumi flight?"

"There are, yes."

"I want one ticket." And suddenly those three days with me not there flash in front of my eyes again. They're doing it, they're doing it all, pleasuring themselves and each other in every possible way. "Sorry, sorry, sorry, I've changed my mind," I say to the girl on the desk, "I'm not flying anymore."

I leave the ticket in her outstretched hand. She mutters something at me. She probably thinks I'm crazy, that the country's full of crazy people just like me. But no matter what she thinks, those three days with me not there just aren't going to happen. I go out of the airport concourse, I get into the car, I'm sitting on a powder keg, I put the key in the ignition and then I freeze. I start to wonder, wonder whether I'd be able to kill some-body if my suspicions were confirmed. I'm surprised by how quickly my two best friends have gone

from being my wife Natia and my best friend and business partner Levan into just some generic “somebodies.” I’m not wondering whether I’ll be able to kill Natia and Levan, I’m wondering whether I’ll be able to kill “somebody.” I don’t know. I’ll find out when I get there. I turn the key, start the engine, and set off back home. On the way I phone Natia and tell her I’m already on the plane, everything’s fine and that she should be good while I’m gone. Then I phone Levan and tell him the same, I’m already on the plane, everything’s fine, and that he should—I change the last bit—take care. Then I put the phone on the car seat next to me and think and think. If my suspicions are confirmed will I be able to kill? And in one ear I hear Natia’s voice, and in the other I hear Levan’s. Then, quite unexpectedly, I remember something else. I remember a beautiful day when Estay and I were sitting in a café drink-ing tea and Estay suddenly asked, as women are prone to do, “Do you love me?”

I sipped my tea, put the cup back on the saucer, smiled, and said, “Yes, I love you,” lifted the cup back up and started moving it toward my lips again.

“Aren’t you going to ask me?”

“What?” I stopped with the cup right in front of my mouth. The steam from the tea tickled my nose.

“Whether I love you or not.”

“I’m asking now: do you love me?” I sipped my tea. Then I put the cup back on the saucer and tried to look serious, because I guessed from Es-tay’s expression that she was about to give a serious and thorough answer to that four-word question.

And Estay said, “I’ve got nobody here. I look left and I’m scared, I look right and I’m scared, I look straight ahead and I’m scared, I don’t look be-hind me but it always feels like there’s something there. And when I look up I’m really, really scared. Because there’s something really strange up there.” I looked up, instinctively—above me the ceiling had painted pat-terns all over it. Estay carried on with what she was saying. “I’m talking about heaven. That’s pretty much why I go around with my head bowed all the time, but going around with your head bowed is really stupid . . .”

I interrupted. “Then lift your head up and look around and don’t be scared. What are you scared of?”

“There are people all around me I don’t know and I’m scared. I’m scared they’ll attack me, hurt me, maybe even kill me.”

I tried to make a joke. “So what if they do? You’ll come back to life as a squirrel and spend all your time running around in the treetops.”

Estay smiled. “You don’t even believe in reincarnation. And anyway, what I’m talking about is something completely different. I’ve got no one here apart from you. Can’t you see how much I love you?”

I kissed Estay. On the neck, for some reason—and then later when they found Estay on top of the rubbish dump with her throat cut I thought back to that kiss and it felt as if my lips were on fire. The police questioned me because my number was the only one on Estay’s phone and she had all my messages saved. In the end the police decided some invisible serial killer was responsible for Estay’s murder. It was only after her murder that I first seriously considered the possibility that someone in that country might kill me too, and that I too had nobody looking out for me, nobody on my side, nobody to call a friend. The opposite, in fact. Any wistful citizens dreaming of the British Empire’s former glory might even say it’s what I deserve. Why did I come—uninvited—to their glorious empire when I should have stayed in my own country, when the empire was already full of freeloaders, when their patience had already run out, and so on? But none of that matters any more, because I’m back in my own country now, and I have a wife, Natia, and a best friend and business partner, Levan, and they’re having an affair. I pick up the phone and call home. Natia answers, I don’t speak, I hang up, I ring the office, Levan answers, I don’t speak, I hang up. So that means they haven’t met up with each other yet. I put my foot on the accelerator. A patrol car stops me, and I remember I’m sitting on a powder keg—I’m licensed to own a gun but not to carry it, and definitely not to sit on it, and I get nervous. But after a few seconds everything becomes a bit clearer: they’ve stopped me for speeding and our relationship never goes beyond them is-suing me with a twenty-lari fine. I put the receipt in my pocket and the patrol car goes on its way. And then, finally, I get home. I park the car well away from the house and open my bag. In my bag along with my clothes, razor, and essential documents there’s a telescope. I take out the telescope and start watching the house. Either Levan will come here or Natia will go out. After an hour Natia comes out of the main entrance. And just where do you think you’re going, my dear? Natia crosses over the road at the lights and goes into the supermarket. That’s when dark thoughts start to appear. I know now what will happen, and that she’ll leave by the back door. But there is no back door. There’s a staff entrance, for the

supermarket's employees— she'll ask them, I should think, and they'll let her out that way. What should I do? What should I do? After a couple of minutes Natia comes back out of the supermarket, and I can relax again. Natia's carrying bags, she's bought some things, she hails a taxi, agrees on a price with the driver, and gets in. The taxi drives off. I'm following you, Natia, my love . . .