

The Taste of Mouse

“Hello Mother! I don’t know how to start. I have never written a letter.

I should probably say right away that I don’t know whether you will ever get to read this. Probably not. Because I am writing all this in the black notebook you gave me. Do you remember, you gave it to me last year on my

26th birthday? I recall what you said even now – that this note book is for ‘the truth which you will never reveal to me’. And that’s what’s also written here, inside the cover. But anyway, I am telling you everything, aren’t I? Have I ever had a better listener than you? I want it to be like that way now, but I can’t tell you out loud like I did before. For the simple reason that now there’s a huge distance separating us. Outside, it’s a baking hot August here. And I have the taste of mouse in my mouth all the time. It’s true that I am thousands of kilometres from where you are, but I’m sure of one thing. If radio waves can cover tens of thousands of kilometres, can it be so that these words are less powerful? How else can I console myself? My darling Mother, you probably aren’t well and I expect I appear in your dreams too... and then, I’m sure, you have the same taste of mouse in your mouth. Is it fear that causes that taste? You probably don’t even know where Abkhazeti is. Even if you ask your acquaintances, I doubt anyone there could tell you exactly where it is. They might guess. Africa, Asia, America. Perhaps Europe too. Exactly, it’s in Europe and Asia at the same time! To hell with my journalism, why did I jump for Sir Editor? I am sick and tired of writing all this nonsense. It wasn’t enough to write about Warsaw, Krakow or Katowice. I wanted to be sent somewhere faraway for a serious task. I was ready for work of a different order. I said I would perform to the highest standard. I don’t know what special quality the editor saw in my eyes, but the way he drummed his plump fingers with their rings on the table was a sign that I would be sent somewhere on a serious assignment. I thought he would send me somewhere to the West. There was a festival of felt artists in Antwerp,

'Metallic' arrived in Hamburg, the anniversary of Conan Doyle was being celebrated in London. But no! What a leap of imagination to think of such an assignment! When had I ever written about politics? You know full well that I've never written a single paragraph about it. And yet Sir Editor said that the President of Georgia was currently on a visit in Moscow and that I had to fly there and meet him. It had been agreed in advance that I should interview him on personal issues and fly back. Or, to put it another way, because that imbecile Magda Iushkoviak got pneumonia in the middle of summer, I had to take over from her. Well, the interview about private matters was not bad. I had conducted a similar interview with the actress Barbara Brylska. Polansky too. Grzegorz Lato. And others. But I have never interviewed a politician, let alone a foreign one. It was even intriguing. Since childhood I've been interested in Moscow, that capital of the former Soviet Union which seems to stretch beyond every horizon. And also I would get to practice my long unused Russian. What could I say? I had asked for it myself, hadn't I? And I got it too. 'That's where you can really demonstrate your talent, your journalist's intuition and skills', he said in a tone that suggested he was talking about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. With those words, he patted me on the shoulder with his hand with the gold ring, and asked his secretary to book me a return ticket for a midday flight. I was to fly there that same day on the late afternoon flight. I didn't need a visa. I would be in Moscow in three hours time. At nine o'clock in the evening, the press conference was due to finish and as for the interview, as I told you, they'd already fixed it. So, what can I say about my luck, that my first trip out of the country brought me here...so faraway...as if I'm in the arsehole of the world. Fate mocked me and also brought me this taste of mouse. I arrived in Moscow the same day. On the way from the airport to the city, I got stuck in a crazy traffic jam for a good three hours. I was spitting for ages out of the bus window, but there was nothing I could do. When I reached the white conference hall it was far too late. An administrator with plucked-out eyebrows said that the president of Georgia and his retinue had flown to Georgia an hour before. Phew! What could I do? Shout or cry? I demanded a telephone and called the

publishing house in Poland. I swore at whoever was responsible for traffic jams and spat again and again. Sir Editor consoled me in a fatalistic tone: 'That's not important' he said. 'It's not your fault at all. Perhaps it was meant to happen that way. We'll book you a ticket from here to fly Moscow-Tbilisi-Moscow and then back to Poland. You'll fly to the Georgian capital this evening, find the guy tomorrow, interview him and come back.' When I asked him, my esteemed editor, why the hell I needed to come back to Moscow and suggested I could go directly back to Warsaw from Tbilisi, I heard him laughing disparagingly down the receiver for ages. 'You're such a dimwit where geography and politics are concerned, I bet you don't even know where Georgia is, let alone the turmoil that's going on there,' he said. Me, a Polish journalist, in charge of covering the Warsaw Society Page, why on earth should I know anything about Georgia or its small and large misfortunes? I still didn't get it, what on earth was so funny? Now, that I'm here, his harsh laughter pierces my ears eternally mocking all the values I held dear back then. Anyway, I've never written anything to you before, have I? You were always on my side without my writing it down all the time. And now I am so far away that you can't even begin to imagine! And so, I'm writing everything to you! I am revealing everything: where I am, how I am and why. And anyway, what on earth am I doing here? To tell the truth, I don't know. I genuinely don't know. It must be fated. Ma, could you ever imagine that I would end up so far away in a country like Georgia? You don't believe it, do you? I don't believe it either, but it's a reality.

'I can't stand cats either,' Petro growled and took my lit cigarette.

'You mean eating them?' I laughed.

‘Because they can’t be domesticated, because... when my granny died, somebody had left the upper part of the window open, so a cat climbed in and, guess what, it ate her ears...’

‘Whose ears, whose ears?’ shouted one of the soldiers standing nearby.

‘My granny’s ears, who else’s ears could they be?’ Petro inhaled the cigarette smoke deeply and burst out coughing.

‘And then?’ I asked grumpily.

‘Then? Come on, you don’t think she grew new ears, do you?’ Petro spat on his cigarette to put it out and stuck it behind his ear. We buried her then like a character in an El Greco.’

‘Who is El Greco, who?’ One of the nearby soldiers was getting interested, ‘He used to paint blokes with no ears ...’

‘What about deaf blokes, Vasa?’

‘No, not deaf, earless...’ Petro clarified.

We all went quiet.

‘Some people are so sick, making money by trading in meat like that!’ Petro muttered thoughtfully and stared at the hedge again.

The scorching heat has turned everything around yellow. Sweat was dripping from us like water and we all needed to be wringed out. The khaki coloured jeep known as ‘Vilis’ had its canvas top down and was crawling along the uneven road leaving a trail of hazy smoke. The dried-out gardens and fields stretched around. Rows of apple trees with red apples on them

in the fields looked like big red mushrooms. I was looking at the trees and my throat was incredibly dry from thirst. A guy called Chopina was fiddling with the camera. As usual, Petro never stopped talking and waved his lighted cigarette around as if it were a conductor's baton.

‘And so, my silly wife is telling the neighbour: ‘My husband has lost his marbles! He comes home at night pissed and chats up babes on the telephone.’ ‘Well, I expect he’s got noble intentions,’ the neighbour defends me. ‘Petro is so mythological and interesting.’ When my wife hears this she goes bonkers. ‘Intentions! Abstinence - what does he know about it?! He’s brought home gonorrhoea and fungal infections seven times already. That fungal stuff is great, especially Imeretian Caesar mushrooms!’ That stupid neighbour is telling her.

‘Sevastich, it is hot, phew. Shall we take a bite of an apple?’ I asked the driver again.

‘Good idea!’ Petro joined in, suddenly sobered up, and he looked round at the fields with the apple trees.

‘As you say.’ Sevastich replied and started looking for a suitable place to stop.

In this part of the field there was only one huge apple tree. Covered in red, all the leaves had dried out and from a distance it really did look like a gigantic mushroom.

Sevastich put on the brakes at the road side. Chopina pointed his camera through the window at the apple red area and started shooting. Then he switched off the camera and started rewinding the tape.

I was the first to jump out of the car, I wiped my wet brow on the soldier's greatcoat and headed towards the tree. Petro followed behind.

‘War at home! War here! War everywhere!...Uh! I would love to sleep for a long time!’ I suddenly heard Petro's voice from behind.

I turned to Petro whilst continuing to walk to the tree.

Chopina was standing near the car looking into the viewfinder; he was examining the earlier shots. Sevastich was fiddling with the radio.

‘Kok! Come on, come here, I will show you what you look like!’ They were about twenty steps to the left of the shadow cast by the tree, when I heard Chopina’s excited voice.

‘He thinks he is in a full screen cinema, fuck!’ Petro mumbled to himself and deeply inhaled the cigarette smoke once more. I stopped, left Petro to the tree and returned to the car on my own.

Chopina stood smiling and pointed the running camera in my direction.

‘What is there that’s so extraordinary?’ I asked disrespectfully and grabbed the camera.

‘Look, what a shot!’

As soon as I raised the viewfinder to my eye, the horrible wave of the explosion threw me and the camera far away down to the dry ground with its full force. Chopina also was immediately thrown next to me, and our ‘Vilis’ with Sevastich inside was turned on its side.

I don’t remember how long I was lying there. I had a horrible piercing sound in my ears and the feeling that my head had grown ten times bigger. The first thing I did when I raised my head with great difficulty was to look in the direction of the apple tree. At that very moment I heard Chopina’s moaning to one side.

The apple tree was nowhere to be seen. In its place, a huge hole gaped like a mouth and black smoke was coming out of it. The whole field was covered with bright red apples, some burst, some intact.

There was no Petro to be seen either.

