

# The Brueghel Moon

## Chapter 2

And she was gone. Lost like a stone thrown into the water. I spent the next three months in a limbo-like state. To be honest, I never thought the whole thing would affect me to such an extent. Not only affect but actually hurl me out of my normal life. Not immediately, but gradually everything seemed to have lost meaning, faded out. I went to work, answered phone calls, but it was pretty mechanical. Judging from my actions and speech it might have been hard to detect the changes which I clearly felt. Apparently no one noticed otherwise they would have told me, indicated in some way. Of course, all my friends and family as well as my co-workers knew about my family drama. People are interested in such things. But they refrained from discussing it with me, which is understandable. However, I felt everyone wanted to hear the story first-hand, to find out what happened in a seemingly quiet, typical Tbilisi family.

I could see something was very wrong with me. It looked like the onset of a nervous breakdown, but I couldn't defy it. And still, most upsetting were the dreams, visions, or images either caused by my depressed mood or the other way round—intensified my dejected state with a strange sequence of a serial. When alone, whether asleep or awake, I saw the world differently, heard different voices. The most painful was occasionally picturing myself as a helpless old man. I desired to confess to someone how one feels when abandoned, left alone with oneself, how bitter and dejected—I didn't want to use the word but here it is—a madman can be. I wished to share it as a secret, which might have been heard out with pleasure, while I would shake it off and feel free not so much from solitude, which is virtually impossible, but of the visions triggered by solitude, which forced me to dwell in another, non-real world.

I thought if I opened the door, an alien, vicious element would dash in like a masked soldier that filled our TV screens. And he would demand the most precious thing I had. I'd gladly give it, but the problem is I don't know what I hold as the most precious and, generally speaking, what is most precious for people? Does anyone know?

Throughout those three months, in my dreams and my wake-fulness, tapping on the door accompanied my state of deep depression constantly.

So, here I am, a hundred years old, sitting in an armchair and I'm aware it's not for real, but I'm thinking aloud. The discovery troubled me because I also felt, or rather guessed, that life doesn't go on—it ends, disappears, fades out in such a way that it's hard to say whether it's

life at all. But if it's not life, then what is? My favorite

Georgian poetic word for life literally means 'a minute in this world.' A strange notion, sounds like the spirit escaping the body.

My armchair is near the radiator in a big, empty room. Sounds reach me from the outside, but I'm not at all certain whether it's a street, a forest, or a vast field. I believe it's someone singing. Half-raised in my armchair, supporting my weight with my hands on the armrests, I repeat, tensely but for some reason joyfully: Can you hear someone singing? Someone's singing! I don't know whom I address, to whom I repeat the words ...

On the walls of my empty heart there are addresses and phone numbers just like those written on phone booth walls. But opposed to them, mine aren't that many and I remember them all. I know exactly whose addresses and numbers they are. How distant and detached everything seems now from what they remind me. Mostly shadowy recollections of brief, accidental encounters. Clothes strewn on the floor, an empty bottle of sparkling wine of course, which I intensely hate, lying on its side. Meaningless, closed-eye whispers, the same word repeated a hundred, a thousand times. Then lying back in the dark, completely still, fulfilled and spent, dozing off for a couple of seconds and then, surely, groping for a cigarette and a lighter ...

Little by little I was becoming convinced I lived a fuller life in my dreams than in reality, especially because they resembled that reality. Some of the dreams were recurrent. It was thanks to my dreams that I lived in a constant state of expectation which had no name and filled me with strange melancholy. Who or what was I waiting for, who was destined to appear in my life to change it?

It was Ia's departure that persistently, and with amazing clarity, featured in my dreams. I couldn't get rid of it, just like Tam-riko's coat fluff. I wanted to die and see her, but not to remember her! But how was I to free myself from her? Isn't it our dreams that testify to our vulnerability when facing ourselves? The scene, recurrent without any alteration, like video evidence presented in a courtroom, gradually convinced me I was guilty, but I didn't know what crime I had committed, what I had to blame myself for. I could easily admit to having committed a crime in the court but I wouldn't be able to say which one exactly if asked. Anyway, I took the blame with all its consequences without even attempting to justify myself. And once I took the burden, I had to carry it—not as merely heavy load but more like a natural defect, such as a hump. I had to swallow my pride and tolerate the humiliation I would otherwise never imagine I was capable of bearing. Don't others do the same? I was asking myself. Don't they tolerate things, all sorts of atrocities primarily, which they eventually get used to, to the extent that they seem to be necessities of life? Broadly speaking, isn't human life the endurance of things absolutely unimaginable in one's young

days? Life is tolerance of atrocity! Oh God, how easily the adolescent blind faith crumbles! I suddenly felt with all my senses that I hastened as if I was late for something, as if I was expected somewhere else. And I believed in the unbelievable—that beyond this world, beyond this reality, just several steps away there is another reality but, like a train in a small station, it's about to leave and I've got to catch it at all costs because I need to get into that another reality which, for some obscure reason, looks like a doctor's surgery with a couch covered with a white oilcloth behind a partition. My imagination didn't stretch further and all I wanted was to stretch on that couch so that all my visions and haunting images would disappear, vanish, disperse in the dark, so that I could forget them once and for all. And all the while, I was—the most important bit—not a doctor but a patient, which made me immensely happy! I'm sick, I thought. Really sick. I might be going mad. How can I cure others if I need to be cured myself? I shared my concern with one of the colleagues I was on friendly terms with. I believe in this case the term asks for an explanation, as our friendship was limited to phone conversations or going across from the clinic to a diner and having a drink or two with our meal. Once he read me a poem of his. Dreadful. I did say, however, that it was fine. He said he knew. What do I do with these dreams I have, the nightmares, the depression, the apathy? I don't want anything, nothing interests me anymore. I don't read newspapers. But I still go to the clinic, do my job. In short, I said, I lie to the patients and myself.

“Are you by any chance drinking without me?” he asked with an impish squint. “Spill it.”

“I'm not,” I said. “Too bad.”

That night he called me to say I'd get used to it because he, for instance, had had three wives. It meant I had wasted my breath telling about my worries and anxieties. No one understands another person. No one, not even the closest one, more than anyone else. They might take your ache to their hearts but will never know how it really aches. Suppose they internalize your pain in full, they can't help you anyway. Who is going to pump out of you all the melancholy and worry hanging down like heavy smoke?

One midnight I opened my eyes and yelled for Mom. I craved her, I wanted to hide my face in her lap, wanted her to pat my head with her trembling hand. I wished to weep earnestly, smear-ing my face with bitter tears like a child. I sprang up, dashed down the hall to my parents' bedroom and did not open so much as fling the door wide. “Mom! Mom!” I shouted. I sat down, then and there. My heart thumped so hard as if it willed to jump out.

Took me some time to get my breath back ... One of my acquaintances told me the following day I had to light a candle. So

I went to the little new church in Vake and lit a candle for Virgin Mary: Mother Mary, can

you please tell Mom I feel lonely? I miss her. I've always feared solitude, more often than not turning a blind eye to lots of things for fear of solitude. It was all my do-ing. I deserved all that befell me. Was it true I made the woman miserable? The one I loved! I had a huge problem saying the word as it felt like scratching my throat from the inside. My entire alarmed essence seemed to hint I couldn't go on alone or rather,

I needed someone to talk to or someone who'd listen with their heart or say things coming from their heart.

That night I dreamed I followed someone in a top hat along the snowy streets. He looked as if he'd stepped down from a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting. He was dressed exactly like Mephistopheles from one of Tbilisi theatre productions, when everything seems all right but something is amiss. Something was a little off about his appearance, but no one, not even Mephistopheles—if he were dead and then came back—could have pointed his finger at what was wrong with his clothes. I thought, God, he's so familiar, I definitely know him. Suddenly it dawned on me it was Lado Tavzar-ashvili, the academic! Where to, Lado? Is it the airport again? He didn't reply but I persisted: Stop thinking about it. Once gone no one has ever returned, and you should know better. Then the man I thought resembled Lado Tavzarashvili and I roamed the empty city streets, finally coming to the river. I seemed to be looking at a frozen river for the first time, lifeless and faceless, like a big stiff fish taken out of the freezer. Indeed, there was the river like a frozen fish wedged between the concrete banks, too big for its frozen, frayed fins. No, it was in my dream I thought I was looking at a frozen river for the first time. In reality I'd seen one the night Tam-riko was born. I got a call in the middle of the night and rushed to the maternity hospital. My father-in-law and brother-in-law were already there. On the way back, my father-in-law refused to be driven home, telling Badri he wanted to take a walk with Le-van. The weather was not inviting for a stroll. We walked without a word. Till dawn. He stopped at the embankment, drew a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. He offered me one. We had a hard time lighting them. There was a bitter, icy wind blowing.

"Where've you been, Levan?" he asked. "Asleep?"

I said I was. I wanted to say I came as soon as I got the call but he didn't let me.

"We nearly lost Ia. She had to have a caesarian."

"I know. The doctor told me," I said.

"The doctor can't have told you what I'm going to say now: I'll kill you with my own hands!"

“Excuse me?” I didn’t catch the first bit.

“Kill you with my own hands,” he repeated, sending the ciga-rette butt into the river with a flick. “The motherfucker’s frozen!” He walked away.

I didn’t follow. I stayed behind for some time staring at the frozen river. Of course I knew exactly what he meant. It wasn’t the first time he said it. In fact he’d said it over and over again: if I ever did anything, even the smallest thing (“as small as my little finger nail” in his words) to upset his precious daughter, who had refused to marry an American millionaire, her brother’s business partner fully approved by her dad, but chose to cling to a loony doctor—his words again—he’d kill me. Actually, he was quite ca-pable of doing it. I stood there, on the embankment, thinking how one’s uncontrolled fury and unrestrained vanity could easily bring him to sheer idiocy. Was it my fault she had to have a cae-sarian to save the baby?

However, the dream man wasn’t my father-in-law, neither was it Lado Tavzarashvili. Just resembled both. We were strangers to each other, quite different, like the inhabitants of different worlds or even galaxies.

“Can’t you see the dog?” the man asked me. “We’ve come to the frozen river specifically for it.”

And by some magic I immediately spotted a poor dog, with its tail between its hind legs, miserably crouching on the bank. If not for its dark bright eyes, one would’ve taken it for a snow heap.

“It’s going to be your travelling companion,” he laughed. I was gripped with fear, trembling all over.

“Am I going blind?” I finally managed to get the words out.

“Quite the contrary,” he said and added after a short pause, “You’ve just had your eyes properly opened.”

“To see what?” I asked or rather clutched at the question as if it were the proverbial straw that would save or probably break me.

“Eventually you’re going to realize that one can learn only from oneself. We learn in order to forget and forget in order to learn more.” The man walked up and down in front of me, in long, steady, noisy strides, as if measuring the distance for a duel or a penalty kick. “However, we don’t know why we learn or forget what we’ve already learnt, but it’s precisely this non-knowledge that al-lows us to keep balance on a piece of slippery ice.

Indeed, we are stuck between forgetting and learning, just like between two trains moving in opposite directions. You don't even know who I am, who you're talking to."

"I know!" I cried with joy as if it was my chance to say the most essential thing which would put everything in its right place. I wanted to say something I failed to tell my father-in-law or Lado Tavzarashvili. The man's words were so familiar, I took them for what either of them could have said.

"No," the man warned me, patting my shoulder lightly. "You don't, and what's more you can't know. You see me as an old opera singer ..."

"Oh, no, no," I waved my arms. I was terribly embarrassed because that was exactly what I thought.

He went on:

"An operatic Mephistopheles! Right? Don't say anything! Don't interrupt me! You believe I'm an actor entertaining by talk-ing to oneself at the frozen river bank."

"Talking to oneself?" I meant to play for time with these words which didn't make much sense because suddenly I realized it was all in my dream so I had to stay as calm as possible. But more than anything it proved most difficult to keep a level head. My voice quivered, the sounds came hoarse and when I repeated the question, I hardly recognized my own voice. It was completely alien, even more, it sounded suspiciously like that of this tall, the-atrial man. We seemed to be talking to each other in the same voice. We had a common voice which we tossed at each other as if it were a tennis ball.

"Yes," he replied promptly, "to oneself as in less than thirty years, which will literally fly as nothing is faster in this world than time, you can turn into someone like me, exactly as I am now, and not only in appearance. And that's not the worst, but you seem to find it highly amusing ..."

"No, I don't!" I interrupted.

"Let me finish," he sounded angry. "Similar in fate too! And destiny isn't something you can change like clothes. Fate isn't a theatrical prop. Neither is it a goatee you can shave off. You were reminded of an operatic Mephistopheles, weren't you? In thirty years you'll be out in the frost, standing by the frozen river, exactly like me, because you won't have anywhere to go. And though you hate snow—or rather there's nothing else you detest as much as snow—you'll come to this frozen river, which is comparable to your entire life. You'll be welcoming the New Year in the com-pany of a dog."

“In thirty years?” I asked with a trembling voice because the tennis ball tossed at me had lost its hardness. “Nothing doing,” I said, “many lead a lonely life.”

“So you are ready to accept it?” the man asked in surprise and pursed his lips. “Don’t you fear solitude?”

“No,” I answered, thinking: Oh God, how come he knows I dread solitude most of all? “No!” I repeated trying to sound more convincing and the tennis ball returned some of its bounciness.

“I’m not scared. The world is full of lonely people.”

The man laughed and walked away. He looked back a couple of times till he disappeared in the distance. I could hear his laughter for quite some time though.

I woke up. My mouth was dry, with a disgusting taste. I got up. Drank some water. I felt as if I had betrayed someone or something.

In the bathroom mirror I told myself not to worry as it wasn’t me I had betrayed. But as I said this I knew I was lying because my heart felt strangely empty, a familiar feeling from my childhood when I used to lie pretty often. I was lying and a sense of vague guilt stabbed my heart.

“You know,” I told myself in the mirror, “I’m going to live in the company of a dog! I’m getting old ...”

I went back to the bedroom and got into the bed. I took a book. Couldn’t read it. Lay there till morning with wide open eyes.

The early onset of old age that I experienced while talking to my reflection in the bathroom wasn’t that unexpected despite my age. Apparently, I grew old prior to the painful realization. I used to calmly cope with everything—the home, the clinic, everything and everyone. I seemed to have been destined to treat people and things with limitless patience, so I didn’t resist. Actually, instead of resistance, I took refuge in the fact just like someone homeless, though I knew, and that was particularly painful, that it wasn’t a house but a snail shell ...

They say, and probably for a good reason, that real life occurs in dreams. We make sense in our dreams, see and hear ourselves in our dreams, realizing and remembering things we seem to have forgotten in our conscious life. In short, it is in our dreams that we know for sure who we truly are ...

It went on for quite some time. I lived in my dream performances, participating in them against my free will, not knowing my lines. Probably I had nothing to say as I was meant to be an extra or was waiting for the grand finale or rather the invisible director had designated me for it. That's what happened in the end but it's too early for that...

The commonplace phrases so essential in our everyday life, which I uttered almost mechanically in the clinic, supermarket and subway, didn't belong to the grand performance. They were so insignificant, I didn't count them as words at all. In short, my life demanded so much energy and caused so much anxiety that I would drag myself to bed, completely exhausted. Even that didn't bring relief: my bed turned into a torture machine. "Did I love her so much?" I thought. "Should I have killed her?" My head was full of these horrid thoughts. My heart would go tender, I would choke on the lump in my throat. And I would spring up. Roam the empty house.

"What you say," my colleague told me, "sounds like an alcoholic's hallucinations."

I believe it was the other way round because every time I got drunk, I slept peacefully, without any dreams.

It was the first time I drank at home. I didn't even think of taking a glass, just drank straight from the bottle. I didn't bother to do it properly, in a civilized way like people do—or rather in a conventionally civilized way as no one can say with certainty what is and what is not human. I got drunk very quickly. In general, I can take plenty of alcohol pretty well, a designated toastmaster at friends' parties. When I woke up the next morning, it felt like surfacing from pitch darkness. In truth, I preferred my nightmares to such dark. As though a dead man had a choice and opted for death, that's how I felt. Then, as I was rummaging among Ia's medicine cabinet, I found Lexotanil pills—so she left something behind! As I swallowed the pink pill, it suddenly struck me that I had been invited to one of the world-renowned clinics in Switzerland thanks to my father-in-law! He might have been paying my high salary from his pocket. And all the while I had been sure, and extremely proud, that I was chosen from numerous Georgian doctors solely owing to my published works. This tranquilizer seemed to be an eye-opener too. Apparently, he decided to get his daughter out of the country, just like his elder son. Ia worked alongside me in the same clinic. And that's when I had to guess my articles might have been completely unknown and unread in Switzerland. Apart from my salary, my flat and car could have been his gifts.

Ia and I had spent ten years in Switzerland. And it was in bits and pieces that news from Georgia usually reached us. There wasn't much on the country in the press either. For the spoilt society it must have been unconceivable even to imagine how another nation suffered so much at the end of the twentieth century. How could no other country support them

when their territories were snatched, their gas supply cut, which looked like clear attempts to physically annihilate the nation? No. They didn't understand, neither did they sympathize as they had safeguarded themselves from any possible problems quite some time ago. Ia and I seemed to be the prisoners of our own security there, but we never dis-cussed it. I worked hard and studied as well—the clinic was a true university for the psychiatrists like myself. Luckily, I could already speak several languages, thanks to my parents. In our free time we walked a lot and travelled by car so we saw much of the country. We used to play tennis nearly every day. Ia was certainly better at it. Used to mock me, calling me 'old'. In those days old age seemed so far away that I didn't contemplate it at all. We used to invite our colleagues from other countries to our house parties for Tamar's Day (our mothers were named after the saint), May

26, our National Day, and Ia's birthday. Babies were a taboo in our family. Ia wouldn't hear of them as she had a pathological fear of childbirth. Our relationship, our marital bed, was like a battle-field. She used to tell me I had to choose between her and a baby.

Usually, I went blank. I didn't know how to react.

"Want me to die?" she used to ask very calmly and that's why it sounded so cynical to me at those moments.

She took some pills. And made me take traditional precau-tions from day one. My father-in-law had organized a grand wedding party. For several hours I stoically withstood the idiotic toasts from the loud toastmaster. However, they couldn't make me dance though five hundred guests cheered standing up: "Let the groom dance!" Ia also asked me, but quietly, as if whispering softly to the plate: "Please, Levan, Dad will be hurt." Then, when finally we were left alone in our room, she undressed without a word and got into the bed. But first, she said she was sorry she wouldn't be able to wear that dress anymore. She lay there, uncovered, looking at me with a smile as I hastily undressed.

"What's the hurry?" she said. I sat down beside her. "Swear," she demanded.

"To what?"

"That you're going to love me forever."

"Good time for an oath! We've just said our vows!" She turned her head and said softly:

"I'm scared." "Of what?" I bent to kiss her. She returned it and repeated: "I'm scared."

“Gonna say of what?” “A baby.”

That’s when I had to go, flee, leave everything behind, move to a distant country where no one could reach me. But at the time there was no force to tear me from the electrifyingly alluring body, from the sweetly enthralling lips. I would’ve agreed to anything.

Anything at all.

“Don’t forget the condom,” she said in a matter of fact way. I had never heard the word from her.

“Where do I get one in the middle of the night?”

“It’s right there, on the bedside stand. Within your reach.” Of course we had a baby, but later, when we had returned

from Switzerland, some four years ago. And for sure, our house needed renovating badly. Ia stayed with her parents for nearly a month, while I, probably the most impractical man in the world, had to deal with the workmen. I’m pretty certain, at least that’s what I deduced after a month spent overseeing the workmen, that if a man can renovate his house, he can easily run a country. Apparently Tamar, Ia’s mother—an extremely caring and sympathetic lady, who seemed to be apologizing to everyone and for everything as if it were all her fault—had worked at trying to make her change her mind. And, waking up one morning in our newly renovated bedroom, Ia squinted from under the blanket:

“Are we going to have a baby?”

“That’d be wonderful,” I said. “I wish we had one!” “Don’t touch me,” she said.

“Ever.”

Some time later my father-in-law visited us, which he hadn’t done before. He was sitting in an armchair, with Ia on his knees. She had her arms around him with her head on his chest. As I opened the door, they took no notice of me. I stood in the doorway. The complete silence was broken by a rhythmic ticking of the wall clock. I felt unwanted. As if I wasn’t welcome. I went out of the room, noiselessly closing the door. I went into my study. Sat at my desk. Took a literary magazine. Opened it. I sat staring at the pages for what seemed quite a long time. Then my father-in-law came in. I rose to my feet. He told me to keep seated.

“Please have a seat,” I drew a chair for him. He didn’t take it.

“You know,” he said, “you’re going to have a baby.”

“Excuse me?” I couldn’t believe my ears. He turned and left without another word.

“Aren’t you happy?” Ia asked me when we were alone. “Shouldn’t you have told me?” I was sulking she didn’t tell me

first.

“Tell me if you’re happy.”

“And you?” I asked in return.

“Me?” She paused, as if debating whether to say it or not. “Me?” she repeated. “Yeah, I’ve decided to have it.”

“Great,” I said.

“Nothing else?” Ia looked at me in surprise. “What else can I say?”

“Right. What else can you say? I know everything. I’m going to be 34 soon ...”

“I know,” I said. “I know your age!” “Are you angry?”

“No, why should I be? But aren’t you scared anymore?”

“In fact, I am,” she replied. “I still am, very much.” “So, it seems,” I said, “our fears have come true.”

“Yes, something I dreaded. I’ve ruined your life ... I’m scared, very scared. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing,” I replied. “You’ve just turned into a woman. A nor-mal woman. True, slightly later than others, but they say, better late than ...”

“Nobody knows it,” she interrupted, “which is better—late or never.” She paused, thinking, then went on as if asking someone else, not me, “A woman?” She looked at me. “You might be right, you know.”

The baby was born. Then my father-in-law died, unexpectedly, last year. He was invited to the Prosecutor's Office, along with many well-known figures. He was kept there for two days. He was said to have paid a lot of money. Then he went on living as usual, but never went anywhere without his wife. She accompanied him all the time, in his car. They used to drive to their summer house in Saguramo, and stay there for a couple of days. He took to garden-ing, pottering around busily all day long. It was there, in Sagu-ramo, that they sat watching TV, and when his wife asked him something, he didn't reply ...

The fact that I recalled everything clearly and meticulously could have been the fault of an early onset of the old age which, as I already said, I had felt while talking to myself in the mirror. The whole thing sounded not like my own experience, but as if someone else had recounted it to me. That explains why most of the things have remained vague, incomprehensible and bizarre till today. It wasn't just my life, because I believe most people's lives are stained, but unlike them, I decided to try to find sense in mine when I wasn't able to think straight because of my depressed state. That's why I failed to guess from the beginning that some things are better left alone, untouched, in the dark. Not some things but everything if, of course, one wishes to live in peace. And not par-ticularly peacefully but ordinarily, just like the rest, following their example. Actually, peace is an extremely relative concept. It's not obligatory for everyone to understand it in the same way, which is utterly unrealistic anyway. But isn't everything relative and con-ventional? "People are similar in being so different," as my fa-vorite English poet says.

"Buddy," my colleague told me, "you think too much of the woman." We were having dumplings and beer in a diner. "You can't go on like this. You've got to move on."

"It's not that easy, I've discovered," I said. "I got used to her. Ten years together, just like two castaways shipwrecked on an is-land, alone. I've got lots of good memories of her." I wasn't obliged to say anything to him, but it was the drink that made me talk, as if I wished to open up and get it out of my heart.

"The other day," my colleague said, "I read about a tribe in Africa. These people eat their own excrement. And some women, apparently, keep theirs for their loved ones, as a special treat."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"No reason." He drank his beer. "A woman's a woman, every-where."

Life seemed to get back to normal little by little. It's true when they say time cures all, but

as Sancho Panza said, what can be worse than something that can be cured only by time? Somehow I kept remembering the night before Ia left for the US, thinking that night could have been decisive, impelling things to take a different course. For the whole year Ia and I had slept separately. She was with Tamriko in the master bedroom, while I slept on the couch in my study. That night when Ia came in, I was already in bed but awake. She had white silk pajamas on. She told me to make room for her and lay down beside me. For quite a long time we didn't speak. Then she asked for a cigarette. I took two from the package. One for her. We lit them. We smoked in silence, then she said, "No one knows what's a lie and what's the truth." Then she got up and left ...

Gradually I regained my usual good disposition. I resumed my regular walks in Vake Park. My old partners greeted me there. And one day I did something quite strange, something I still find baffling—I went to my father-in-law's grave! As a rule I don't often go to cemetery, only occasionally visiting my parents' grave in the Pantheon. I pay a woman to take good care of the place. The granite bench by the grave was very dusty. I spread my handkerchief and sat down. I already knew it was stupid of me.

Why was I there? Was it normal for me? However, sometimes normal people do such crazy things that they would stun even the craziest people. My being at his grave was sheer madness, for want of a better word. But that's exactly what set me thinking. It seemed I had something to say to him, something which made me lose peace of mind, something which I would never dare tell him while he was alive. I always found it hard to talk to rude, gruff, unforth-coming people. I found it hard because rudeness or impoliteness angered me to the extent that I couldn't talk to them in the manner they deserved. In other words, I couldn't be rude to them in return. Besides, anger made me forget the main thing I needed to say, reflecting on it much later when in bed, I'd start thinking I had to say it in this or that way, but it was hopelessly late anyway ...

The man now gloomily staring at me from the picture framed by the granite slab had spoiled his daughter, my wife, from early childhood to the extent that she grew into an ambitious, haughty, nervous egotist, demanding constant attention, praise, reassurance, love and care, special treatment like a rare exotic flower. Once, in

Switzerland, she told me she had spent an entire year in bed as a child. Not knowing what was wrong with her, she said, her parents tried to fulfill her every wish and whim. It was strange timing because we were sitting on the sofa watching TV and I watched her profile thinking my god, she hasn't got a single friend, not a single woman she can call a friend. Telepathy exists, of course it does. Everything exists that you believe doesn't. "Nothing is but what is not," Shakespeare said. I could have yelled it down my father-in-law's grave, blamed him for our divorce. There was a grain of truth in that, but a very small one. Instead I said, "Please forgive me. It seems I've never loved your daughter. I destroyed her. I deserve to be killed. I'm sorry you didn't kill me when the time was right." I didn't mean it ironically. I

was dead serious. I really believed so, or rather someone talking instead of me thought and believed so, being more outspoken, brave, and bitter, while I just listened. Un-imaginable, but I wanted to prompt that someone else to tell my father-in-law that sometimes we commit the gravest of crimes in the name of love.

I left the cemetery. Seemingly relieved of the burden. Apparently I had needed to go to his grave, as it had long haunted me.

Could it have been one of the reasons for my unusual anxiety? I said I never loved her. Isn't imaginary and then believed love disgusting, sheer evil? But I was sure I loved her. I had never thought about it, never doubted it for a second. Probably because I preferred it that way. Preferred to love her. I might have forgotten, but does anyone ever remember that an imaginary, forced love can be ruthless? It never forgives you. Someday, somewhere, unexpectedly, it's bound to hit you on the head. Never mind yourself because you pay for your spiritual laziness, but doesn't someone else fall victim to the misunderstanding?

That night I dreamed he stretched his arm from the grave—I recognized his gold Rolex—and grabbed my handkerchief I left on the bench, crumpled it in his fist and dragged down under ...

That was my last nightmare!

After that things went on as usual. Ia didn't phone from the States even once, nor did I try to find her number. I played tennis and went to the clinic as usual. Not very often, but occasionally my colleague and I would go over the road to our regular diner. That was it. Several months passed in uneventful monotony. I shied away from meeting new people. In the evenings I would stay home reading, or diligently, stubbornly, and meticulously putting everything I did or thought about into my diary. In general, it may be interesting to read about a 53-year-old man whose wife cheated on him and ran away, especially if it's told in detailed, naïve candor. I had started to keep a diary in Switzerland. With pedantic precision, I used to write down everything I thought interesting. In fact, everything was new and interesting. I even came across jokes popular among my colleagues at the time in my diary. Now I couldn't remember why I liked them or why I found them funny. Jokes become dated faster than movies. I also seemed to have read a lot, mainly medical literature. I had taken notes on Freud and his followers' works, which of course were out of my reach in Georgia. I had read Frisch and Dürrenmatt, but apparently wasn't particularly impressed. I went to a symphony music concert in Geneva. The German Requiem by Brahms! The whole page was full of exclamation marks. I remember leaving the hall utterly dazzled. I put the diary aside, found the disc and was listening to the record not only that evening but the whole week.

Time passed. Nothing interesting was happening in my life.

But an old suspicion, dating back to my student days, reminded me of itself, possibly because, frankly speaking, I couldn't help myself, let alone others: I remembered coming across Aristotle's phrase which nearly made me change my mind about my chosen career.

But the profession, apart from being extremely interesting, was hereditary. I was simply obliged to carry on the family tradition. One of our family friends used to joke that doctors were like monarchs only in that 'the crown' is passed down hereditarily, but as opposed to royal dynasties, the results are often better among doctors. As I said, when I read Aristotle's phrase, I was bewildered. The philosopher said: "When dealing with the human soul, there is nothing that can serve as entirely trustworthy, solid evidence." At the time I thought a fortune-teller was a better word for me than a doctor, or even a prison warden caring for a poor soul confined in a life-long cell, guarding the happy society. I shared my not-so-happy thoughts with my dad. I did fear he might have taken them for stupidity, but who'd give me better answers than him? For some reason dad found it amusing. He was putting on his coat in the hall. He took time buttoning up, opened the front door and said before stepping out: "When I was your age, I thought exactly like you, that treating the unknown was like fortune-telling, nothing else." Yes, but, I ran after him, without a coat or hat. What about Hippocrates's oath? Is it nothing else but loyalty to helplessness? Belief in something non-existent? An ode to fanaticism? He laughed loudly and said: "I believe because it's absurd! Now go home before you catch cold." That was the suspicion gnawing at me: to hell with me, never mind that I deceive myself, but what about the patients who I wreck instead of curing them? In truth, lies helped both sides, me and my patients, soothing us alike because we lost the sense of alarm, but gained alluringly merciless hope. Dad used to say, "Curious, my dear gentleman, curious!"