Santa Esperanza

by Aka Morchialdze

fragments

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From **Notebook 2**

Two houses festooned with bunches of grapes

Libertalia

Extract from an early nineteenth-century picaresque novel by a French adapter who as his source most likely used works by Daniel Defoe and Cervantes.

Indeed, Ginés de Pasamonte was a man of the land, a peasant in caballero's clothing, the seventh child in a family of mule-drivers. By the time he was thirty he had already experienced gaol, the madhouse and more besides. To a keen eye, his broad cheekbones and whittled fingers would reveal his character, as would his furrowed, scratched and dried-up body to the cheapest prostitute. He was more a man of the knife than the sword, but he was always skilled at acquiring a set of lavish clothes, evidently just when he needed them.

Ginés de Pasamonte was a gleeful and jovial man who used to sit grinning in the corner of the inn. If indeed he did sit, since he would get infernally bored by being in one place.
He carried these improbable victuals: in his bag were always an arithmetic textbook in Latin, rewritten by some licentiate, and Aristotle's *Poetics*, also translated into Latin. What was strange in

this respect was that he knew no Latin, but he knew how to play cards, all the multiple moves and snares of this devilish bundle of paper.

He himself was a traveller, here by foot, there by boat, wherever he could make his living, solely by playing cards. It was a chance event that caused his flight from Madrid to Seville: while sitting in a bathing barrel at an inn, he took off his shirt and scrubbed his body. It was abundantly clear he did not know that the serving girl from the inn, still a virgin, was staring at him. This girl did not notice the obvious spectacle, rather something rare yet harmless: the tattoo on his shoulder that some gypsies gave him during boyhood. Unfortunately it was a strange and indecipherable symbol that Ginés de Pasamonte himself had seen only once in his life, since only once had he ever had two mirrors to hand. Yet the girl saw the tattoo as a sign of the devil and told one of her friends and she informed her mother. This woman's second husband was a constable who soon realised that Ginés de Pasamonte was a man who loved cards and entertainment who could always easily acquire a set of lavish clothes. The constable kept watch over Ginés de Pasamonte and before long he realised that, if he truly terrified him, it was possible the constable would obtain a source of income. At their first meeting the constable brought up the Holy Inquisition, but at their second meeting Ginés de Pasamonte hit him in the head with the handle of his dagger so that he slept for two days and nights and Ginés de Pasamonte scooped up his belongings.

How did such a shrewd and cunning man come to be on the shore of the Black Sea in the city of Kaffa, a city whose end fate had already determined to be reincarnation as a nomads' cowshed?

Ginés de Pasamonte was fond of the Genoans. He boarded their ship in Seville and sailed with them straight to Genoa. Kaffa was an extension of Genoa but at the edge of the Black Sea. However, before that, when sailing on a ship to Genoa, he made the acquaintance of a kind, young monk of Genoan descent, Caraccioli, and also of a student called Stefaneli. Ginés de Pasamonte introduced himself as an impoverished nobleman and before long realised that the monk's sparkling eyes and pure faith in human goodness would yield him a fair profit.

And that is why on the ship's deck one time, when it had already gone dark, Ginés de Pasamonte plucked a pack of cards from his breast pocket and seemed to examine it in the darkness and kept groaning. It was a Spanish pack of forty cards and was heavily worn.
The sympathetic monk asked why he was groaning and the swindler and thief replied:

'Oh, kind sir, I should like to inform you that my patron saint is St Sebastian and, when still just a child, I swore to God that on reaching the age of thirty, I should have collected forty-one icons of St Sebastian. Now here I sit counting these icons and, unless my eyes deceive me, I say to myself, "Surely I don't have forty-one, do I?" In a few days we shall be in Genoa and in exactly ten days I shall be thirty years old. My purse is empty, so how on earth might I obtain the forty-first icon? Hence, this means the vow might be broken and that is why I groan. Moreover, I swore that the forty-first icon would be great and impressive, not like those that are sold everywhere.'

'Do not worry, my son,' said the monk, 'I have some ducats set aside for good causes, but yours is indeed a divine matter…'

And he handed over the jingling ducats, to which Ginés de Pasamonte responded with a cursory self-benediction, while attempting to interest the student Stefaneli in his books. The student had a book of his own and was reading intensely. This book was called *Tales Recounted by the Merchant Marco Polo to Rustichello da Pisa* and he read it quietly to Ginés de Pasamonte once he had identified him to be a trustworthy man. Ginés de Pasamonte soon noticed that the student and the monk were conspiring and they seemed to have decided on something.

'This man was in charge of the Venetian galleons in the war with the Genoans. Later on, while imprisoned in Genoa, he related the story of his travels in the east to a certain Pisan,' explained the student. 'Now, many in Genoa say that if you keep going west, in the end you will reach the east. However, I believe that if you keep going east, then you will reach the east. This book confirms this. On the Black Sea was the Venetian city of Sudak. Kaffa is also on the Black Sea. They say that the heathens have blocked the whole sea, so as not to admit anyone, but it is possible to travel by land.'

'I must found a true republic,' declared the monk on the fifth day. 'A true republic, a country of free people. The great Khans have many lands and will make us a gift thereof. Our republic will be called Libertalia…'

It soon came to light that Ginés de Pasamonte was to be in charge of the customs house.

In Genoa they went to a house in which they encountered no fewer than seven insane youths. One of them, whom they appointed city mayor, was, however, in real life from a wealthy and powerful bloodline and he intended to flee with several bags of money from the family bank. He opened out a map before Ginés de Pasamonte, saying: 'This is how the world truly is!'

Ginés de Pasamonte had never reflected on how the world was. He understood that if he followed these madmen in their campaign, he would be guaranteed to win – free food and drink and easy money – since he would always beat them all in a game of cards. If needs must, he could even turn to his knife. And besides, since trailing after the Genoans, he had already acquired two sets of lavish clothes.

'No one yet knows that in Libertalia will be born a new nation. We will convert the Asians to our religion and marry their women.' Ginés de Pasamonte became a member of the secret society 'The Great Oriental Libertalia'.

The godfather

Kaffa was a city where watermelons rolled through the streets.

Some jester would buy watermelons and let them roll down the street. The bends were so sweeping that the rolled watermelons would end up without a single split and reach the sea, where they splashed down into the water and bobbed on the waves.

At that time on the Black Sea, however, sailors did not call watermelons 'watermelons', rather 'gifts of Kaffa'. You should have seen the uproar at that time when, on their way uphill, the ascending ladies caught sight of a host of watermelons hurtling downhill, leaving them breathless with their backs pressed against the wall. But this is all a fairy tale, since it was not just watermelons that fell into the sea from Kaffa.

Once upon a time, the Venetians, for whom Kaffa was a thorn in their side, encouraged Jani Beg, King of the Kipchaks, to attack the walls of Kaffa. For the Kipchaks, access to the sea meant nothing. The seawater was not even of any use to them for drinking, but Jani Beg still went to the walls of Kaffa and laid siege.

It was bitterly ironic that the Kipchaks were here, staring at those solid walls, while death crept up behind them, unafraid of the Kipchaks' blood-curdling cries or their arrows that roared along the plains. The enemy crept up behind Jani Beg: pestilence. The first pestilence, which came over the deserts and cities, annihilated and killed, slaughtered and devastated everything.

And when the pestilence reached Jani Beg's camp and started the fever, plague and killing, the King of the Kipchaks grieved. He cursed the walls of Kaffa, but the Genoans looked down calmly from above. However, side by side with death, the king had an idea out of spite and began to hurl the plague-dead Kipchaks over the walls by means of fire-catapults. The people of Kaffa

realised that the fire of hell was raining on their city and they set about throwing the corpses down into the sea. The port was deserted and four ships wary of the plague followed the wind to Genoa, but the plague was already onboard.

A poet from Santa Esperanza, Maffeo Taneli, wrote a long poem on the story of the watermelons that fell into the sea and the plague-stricken Kipchaks. He thoroughly berated the people of Kaffa, because this Maffeo, since he lived in Tana, had to be Venetian, and the Venetians tried to make Tana superior to Kaffa. Yet it is amazing how Maffeo came to be among the Genoans, who decided to establish a new Kaffa and came to the Ioane Islands. Though a writer's intention is completely different and Kaffa's wondrous history will not fit on a single scrap of paper.

Let us say this, however, that the Turks, when they seized Kaffa, enthused by its beauty and stained with blood they shouted: 'Küçük Istanbul! Küçük Istanbul!', which means 'Little Istanbul, Little Istanbul'.

But in this matter it behoves us to keep focused on the chronology, because we must see Ginés de Pasamonte once more, this time ten years later as an itinerant trader.

In 1449 the Bishop of Kaffa brought a document from Genoa: the Constitution of the Colonies, in which it was written that all nationalities, Jews, Armenians and those of other faiths, were esteemed equally in Kaffa in trade and business. In 1453 Mehmed II stormed Istanbul and left his handprint on the wall of Hagia Sophia. All the same, he did not touch the wondrous Genoan town of Galata, which stood at the edge of the metropolis. Leaving the town untouched did not change the overall story: Kaffa's demise was sealed.

This was plain to see.

Ginés de Pasamonte arrived here about ten years earlier and had stopped following the 'Order of the Great Oriental Libertalia' into the hot climes of Asia as a founder of the Republic of Libertalia. As though he had fallen ill with an incurable disease, from his sickbed he bid his friends farewell as they hurried to the lands of the Khazars. He was now a captive trader.

Anyone who has not seen the captive market in Kaffa, who has not traded there and whose heart has not burned on seeing a Circassian woman peering out from behind a veil, has seen one or two absurdities in life. One or two absurdities and a mouthful of wine.

Ginés de Pasamonte, a Spaniard who spoke every language and whose stall stood on the captive-market square and who purchased a charming house from a Greek, forty years old and a

bachelor, would dispel his wicked thoughts by sucking sultanas and he could see that his trade would soon die and that only the south would remain in business because the water in the Black Sea had been dammed and the Black Sea became known as 'Kara Deniz'. He had seen many Ottomans, talked to them in their language and realised that, when a Goliath decides to lie down, he does not lie down halfway. In general, no man exists who lies down halfway, especially a Goliath.

Early one Friday morning Ginés de Pasamonte went to the merchant house of Lucchino da Costa, which stood right on the harbour, facing the sea. He went to sit on a long bench in the gallery and he sat until Signor da Costa appeared, accompanied by twenty men.

'I am Ginés de Pasamonte,' said the Spaniard.

'I know. I have seen you on the captive square.' The Genoan paused for just a second and stepped through the door to the merchant house. Ginés de Pasamonte followed and then pursued him, 'I know everything.'

'What?' Da Costa came to a stop. 'What do you know?'

'Standing on the market square I hear many stories, but when it comes to business, I never talk in the presence of twenty men.'

Da Costa laughed with contempt. The captive market was practically his. Roughly 200 such traders could be counted there.

'Do they tell interesting tales at the captive market?'

'In general it is the case that lies will have travelled halfway around the world before the truth will have time to put on one shoe.'

'Who said this?'

'His name is Marco, a ship's first mate…'

Niccolò da Costa looked at his twenty companions and said, 'I will speak to this man.' Then they went upstairs and da Costa strode on to the balcony.

'Well?'

Ginés de Pasamonte spoke directly, 'Your ship leaves the day after tomorrow.

'I knew that.'

'You will probably know everything that I shall tell you, but what is important is that I also know.'

'You Spaniards have wrecked everything, absolutely everything. It is your fault that we are all in this state.'

'A vagrant has no nationality,' laughed Ginés de Pasamonte, 'but others will soon be in Kaffa. Perhaps not in our lifetime, but it will be so…'

'I'm listening, I'm listening…'

'I know your ship is going to the Ioane Islands. I know what that means. There is nothing there, and moving the bank and the port there shows that you have done nothing in life and you are starting everything afresh. That is why I conclude that you are arranging refuge there.'

'There is no port there… There's just the fortress commander, who is in charge of the pirates and calls himself king. Greeks and Georgians are there, cooking porridge and making wine, nothing more. I am sending my nephew on account of some personal matters. There is no trade whatsoever, if you are wondering. From time to time they take captives from the shores of Colchis, but you will probably know more about that…'

'Listen to me, Signor.' Ginés de Pasamonte looked him in the eye. 'I know their language. I had a captive who did not sell for a long time and he taught me. I have nothing to hide: in my past life I have been a pirate and a swindler and have made good use of my knife. Now I am growing so old that I am still unmarried. Let me speak to the pirates. The time will come when these islands will truly be our sole refuge, because a besieged man will not win a victory when this siege is set not by soldiers but by entire nations. Let me go to that island and there I will arrange for you what you need. I have a fine house and a captive stall here. If you don't trust me, I will hand over all my property to you in writing.

'Why?' asked da Costa, 'why?'

'Because I am a vagrant and I desire something new. Moreover, I do not want to become the city's heroic defender.'

'In that case, what do you want?'

'I want to be a peasant and tend to other people's farmsteads. I want to play cards in the evenings, because it is years since anyone in this city has played with me. Even the sailors in the port have spread the word: don't play with Ginés de Pasamonte; he wears a green frock-coat and his fingers are missing. I had to play in gloves. I stuffed the empty fingertips of the gloves with handkerchiefs.'

'I have heard that joke, but there they do not know how to play cards. It's a completely different story there. The Georgians consider trade to be shameful and their faith forbids them from playing cards.'

'Just as it is with us,' laughed Ginés de Pasamonte, creasing the wrinkles around his eyes. 'They will learn. I have been learning all my life.'

With these words, he unfastened his bag, pulled the strap and took out two books: the arithmetic textbook and Aristotle's *Poetics*.

'Ah, do you also write poetry?' Signor da Costa no longer laughed with contempt.

'This island is my hope.'

'Since you are passionate about poetry, you will know how to write.'

'I can at least read.'

Letter to the owner

To Signor Niccolò da Costa, Kaffa, in the Genoan possession.
From his representative in the Ioane Islands, Ginés de Pasamonte.

Greetings! I send my regards to your family and business with hope and best wishes under the protection of St Sebastian.

For the second time in this second year I am sending you my annual letter, which I am despatching with your loyal Albano.

I was thrilled by the arrival of your ship here, since on the ship appeared everything I asked for in my earlier letter, which is vital for organising the business better.

I shall tell you my news. You might recall from the sketches I sent last year the place I measured for you on the large island. At present there is already a house made from wood, since it is too difficult to get stone here. There are rocks on the small island in the north, where it is possible to set up a quarry, but this is a matter for the future.

For the time being the wooden one is fine, since it is broad and capacious. The costs are bearable because Fortress Commander Papuna is a good man and because frequent gifts are also good for lowering prices. All the island's peasants, without exception, are serfs to the king. The garrison in Colchis supports itself by wretched piracy and wages paid by the fortress commander. Poverty is all around, but there is no danger as long as you do not intend to mock anyone.

From the break of day I have been tied up in a thousand matters: I have chosen four peasant boys and am teaching them Spanish swordplay, as much as I know, of course. They should turn out to be good guardsmen. The time will come when I will free them from the fortress commander. Many of the plant seeds that you sent me have grown well enough and the peasants have taken them

on, albeit cautiously. It is now the second year, so let us see how things turn out. I am giving the fortress commander his sum of money so that he grants the peasants the right to work on our land.

As a gesture of good will, I have donated the seeds and one or two seedlings to the local Greek monastery. They conveyed their thanks and whenever they meet me on the road, they greet me. This is important because they determine exactly the mood of the people.

In the stable the newborn are doing well.

You probably think that the *alcalde* of swindlers and captive-buying Ginés de Pasamonte has become a peasant, but that is not so. There is a wonderful place here for setting up a captive market, a naturally straight and spacious place by the sea, between the fortress and the monastery. It turns out that I have a very good income on this island that is expected to grow. As an example, the thirty sacks of wheat that I am sending you are absolutely not from your fields. It is sustenance won by me in a game of cards.

In the same game of cards I won two fine country estates, the first a centurion's and the second from the captain of their wretched fishing boat. One might say that the fishing boat is half mine and it is only at the fortress commander's request that they float it in the sea. I was delighted when you sent me two new packs of cards decorated with French symbols. It is good if such merchandise is still to be found in Kaffa.

Here everyone plays 'L'hombre', which I taught them and which I have as a source of additional income, not out of any kind of malicious intent, because while they had not learnt it well, I did not play for money, even where there was enough money that a man might play for. Eggs, pumpkins, horses, plots of land – this is what I won. However, if they sense they are losing, they will throw the cards at you and run away. One time, the Abbot observed that from morning until evening the peasants and castle guard were engrossed in playing cards.
He sternly demanded that the fortress commander forbade the game. I went bearing gifts and apologies and our tripartite negotiations concluded by forbidding cardplay before sunset and this was allowed only in a wattled hut built expressly for this purpose. Furthermore, the monks brought their measuring compass and demanded that this hut should be no closer to the monastery than 3000 strides. This is what we agreed.

I am delighted that you have also discussed with other noble families the matter of procuring village lands. If I can arrange this matter, then it will probably be such that we ourselves can lease or sell them with no further need for the fortress commander.

You must forgive me one conceit. I made the locals plane some planks and I fashioned them into one good board and got it hammered in at the boundary line of our estate, beside the sea. I even inscribed on it the name of the estate, which ought not sound unfitting.

I have dubbed your estate Santa Esperanza.

I believe this will be a place of hope not just for us, but if you are not fond of this name and if you wish to honour some saint in particular, send word to me and I shall change the name immediately.

The sunsets here are so beautiful, probably because one cannot sense a city behind one's back. Solitude is in no way wearisome. With the locals one cannot grow weary. It is because they have elongated moustaches and short beards and wear distinctive clothing. They also have their own style of swordplay and, even though they love banditry, they are an honourable and modest people.

Ginés de Pasamonte, Santa Esperanza, 17 August, 1463

Three oxen with bunches of grapes on their horns

A convincing account of the inconspicuous from afar

In the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia, which is to say in the Soviet Union, or else one-sixth of Mother Earth, lived a scholar: part philosopher, part expert in research of the Georgian tongue, who was not even a member of the Communist Party and he earned his first scientific degree, 'docenture' in local parlance, having turned grey, through a gruelling ordeal.

Surely it is commonplace that a quiet, pitiable man, with reglued spectacles and a cold house left unloved, will take to something and pursue it both as his life's speciality and with professional vigour.

This man was called Valodia Nebieridze. He drank amply and without company, had one large briefcase that from adolescence until death he would carry around with him in the streets of Tbilisi and he would sprout an unkempt, long beard, which was a great rarity at that time in Soviet Georgia, because in communist society they regarded a beard as a sign of mourning, recalcitrance or divine devotion and the secret police would also examine with greater scrutiny the pages of the lives of bearded men. Therefore, no one wore a beard. Beardedness was tolerated for a priest (if he were taciturn), for a painter (if he were youthful) and for an archaeologist (but from the mid-70s and only in summer when fieldwork would be underway).

If a bearded man were neither artist, nor archaeologist, nor priest, nor enemy, nor mourner, then they would judge him to be an eccentric fellow. Good-hearted people would judge him thus, even though the more malicious would say he was a lunatic.

Valodia Nebieridze had no one apart from one nephew, whom, truth be told, he raised well and whose elevation to professor he lived to see.

To his nephew he bequeathed the fruits of his academic labour, the organisation and publication of which would in fact be impossible in the communist era; in other words, he was unable to accomplish it.

The entire works fitted inside the leather bag that the deceased lugged around with him and, at every propitious moment, with anyone he encountered or happened upon, he would strike up a conversation about the contents of this mysterious bag.

The contents of this bag were perilous if viewed by experts in Soviet ideology, but if you could manage for a moment to view it simply as scholarly endeavour, it would no longer be something perilous, since there was little that was scholarly and in no way could anyone make use of these writings.

Valodia Nebieridze's starting point was a map of Georgia from the latter twelfth century, which he would have you compare with a map of Georgia subsumed into the Soviet Union. Incidentally, a scholar in another field entirely, with uncommon arithmetical exactitude, without any kind of computational device, calculated the total extent in square kilometres of the lands lost by Georgia from the twelfth to the twentieth century and in a searing conclusion he reported to us that of the true Georgia only one-fifth remained.

To Nebieridze's mind, natural physical reunification was vital for the harmonious development of the country and under no circumstances could a country so fragmented even contemplate advancement.

What was astounding in this matter was that when Nebieridze was writing this, at that time Georgia did not exist at all as a country and was but one fragment of Soviet territory.
All this would prove merely a prologue and it was, let us say, a substantiation of why Nebieridze had decided to create a colossal work about Georgians stranded beyond the borders of Soviet Georgia.

The work would be conceived as five great tomes and into each would go a historico-philosophico-religio-socio-philological depiction of the Russian, Turkish, Azerbaijani, Armenian and Ioanian Island Georgias.

Regrettably this work proved ponderous and nerve-shredding for Valodia Nebieridze and his entire life would be enough to write but a handful of article-style pieces on the ethnography and history of the Ioanian Islands.

In the Soviet Union it was challenging to write about and research Santa Esperanza, or the Ioanian Islands to the Georgians. Such a thing was undertaken in only three or four Moscovian institutes and even this was with a focus on geopolitical and contemporary matters, since Santa Esperanza was judged an inimical state by the Soviets and the routes leading there were open only to spies. In the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia it was written that this was a British dominion which was governed by English reactionary cliques. And apparently not a single word was stated anywhere about Georgians living there alongside different nationalities.

Far removed from Moscow, it was in one of Tbilisi's insignificant research institutes or libraries that a man rummaged through the annals, wishing to rake up something about the Ioanian Islands; he was neither intriguing nor menacing, so it seems the security services did not ever harass Valodia Nebieridze with any seriousness.

In wine cellars he used to drink from jars, because there were no glasses. They prohibited wine cellars from selling wine by the glass, so that these establishments might not be repurposed as taverns.

It was in 1985 that Nebieridze expired, at seventy-eight years of age, from pneumonia brought on by kidney failure. He lived as long as befitted such an imbiber of wine but joylessly all the same. Two years thereafter perestroika began. Four years thereafter Georgia was emancipated from the Soviet yoke and proclaimed its independence. Borders were unbarred, a free press was founded and wars broke out, among themselves, in the city and in the countryside. Gangsters and politicians sprang up.

Nebieridze did not live to see it, but on account of the wars the country lost territories again and this time a certain politician, and former scholar as it happens, unexpectedly announced to all, 'The works of the deceased Valodia Nebieridze, which were wholly unjustly suppressed by the Communists, forewarned us, educated us and also cultivated the notion of founding Great Georgia.'

This politician was no fascist, but since fascism was coming into vogue, the newshounds tracked down Professor Nebieridze with ease and conducted not a few interviews about his uncle. He played along with the game and loosened his tongue and, having got a taste for it, he dug out his uncle's lousy bag, took out his inheritance, read, emended and saved it to his computer. Help soon came and Valodia Nebieridze's book *Ioanian Island – My Georgia*, was published most effortlessly.

In the book are included a handful of studies and it is not at all hefty. The studies are tinged with a surprising passion that Nebieridze's unkempt, long beard most likely used to conceal.

Most of the sources from which he dredged the information that he was investigating are unknown. For instance, in the article 'What we should learn from the Ioanians', Nebieridze sets out the geographical location of the Ioanian Islands in the Black Sea, their multinational composition and asserts that the Ottomans, the Italians and the English strove incessantly to conquer these islands, although they were unable to secure them and all the same the region remained a loyal constituent of United Georgia. He was troubled only because the Global Freemasonic Conspiracy, which was an unknown concept in the Soviet era, was able to encage the islands with clouds and transformed them into a holiday resort for moneyed capitalists and likewise changed the name of the ancient Georgian land, dubbing it Santa Esperanza.

'We Mainlander Georgians call the sea "zghva", which connotes that we fear the sea as we do fire. This is inevitably why we have never had a decent fleet, even though we boast a vast and heavenly coastline.

"'Zghva" comes from the word "sazghvari", a 'border', which as you will be aware, is a well-defined place and it is hazardous to set foot over it,' writes Nebieridze. 'In contrast, the Ioanians, viz. the Islander Georgians, call the sea "imedi", which derives from the indigenous word "imdi".

"'Imedi" has the meaning of "hope" and clearly this is infinitely superior for a man of action than "across the border" and thus even life in these two Georgias will in the same way differ completely, although, like a child, the Ioanian Islanders are still bound to Mother Georgia and time will come when they will be united, as is also attested in southern Georgia by an inscription in Shakhtigora church, where beneath a fresco is this 11th century inscription: "May Jesus and John be as one".

And if we seek to reveal the authentic content of allegorical writings of the time, Jesus symbolises Great Georgia and, clearly, John the islands. Clearly the island's present-day toponym comes from "sea of hope", which the Freemasons exploited fully.'

Thus writes Valodia Nebieridze, now departed, and time and again extracts from his book turn up in the papers.

What is troubling here is that Valodia Nebieridze knew nothing much about the Ioanian dialect, since just as the word 'imdi' is not be found in the indigenous tongue, the sea is called 'zghva' in Ioanian and it seems the Ioanian Georgians have never had a great fleet either. Indeed, the

Genoans used to call them naval bandits. Equally Valodia Nebieridze knew nothing much about the Freemasons, since in the Soviet era they published only agitprop pamphlets about them, otherwise you had to get your hands on a book published before 1917.

Nonetheless, his writing stirred up notions in several of the country's governing cabinet, but scholars gave the book's publication short shrift, although in times past they would have torn it to shreds. The reason for this was that Valodia Nebieridze had been dead for ten years and, of course, the dead do not take offence and cannot make a retort.

Yet a certain politician in particular took the book to heart, asserting that this book would spur on the founding of Great Georgia.

War and death ensued.

That summer this politician managed to find his way to Santa Esperanza on a tourist package. He flew in from Istanbul, there being neither a flight nor any other means from Tbilisi. From the aeroplane they escorted him through the airgate. At customs he collected a visa and no sooner had he stepped out of the airport's entrance hall than he prostrated himself on the tarmac in front of the taxi rank and began to kiss it. People stopped and stared.

He got to his feet and, in English, he said, 'I came to Esperanza and saw Georgia.' And in his suitcase lay ten pristinely packaged copies of Valodia Nebieridze's explorations on the history of the Ioanians.

His sojourn there went unnoticed, if we gloss over his outburst at the airport. Of the ten books, he gave away but two and left behind eight in the hotel room the day he set off.

He made the pleasurable acquaintance of an illustrious local man, Konstantine Visramiani, who afforded him old-fashioned Georgian hospitality and pledged to visit Georgia.

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From **Notebook 4**

Two yoked oxen hauling bunches of grapes

Glory to the queen and glory to the people

This old woman was the only one. She had experienced it all and was. They were waiting for her to die. She also had a grandson by the name of Demetre, but she sent him away to study and he never returned.

This is what usually happened on the island. Being sent away to study meant you inevitably had to come back respected and immediately on your return be employed in some business or other.

Yet he never returned. He used to write letters to his grandmother, which everyone knew about through the central sorting office, but how would they know what he wrote and how the old woman replied?

The old woman would go to the bank once a month.

She lived in the Pipe District in a two-bedroomed apartment on the first floor and was called Agatia. More properly, she was called Agatia Tsikhistavi Archiliani, Ruler of the Faraway, the Water and the Heavens, King David's Ordained, Universal Ruler of David's Line, Maidservant of John the Baptist, Crusader and Great Gentlewoman.

This was the title of the last descendant of the fortress commanders and pirate-kings, who turned out to be a woman.

Sometimes a woman's reign is without question better for the throne.

The son, whom she stubbornly called Solomon IV, perished in a well-known incident about twenty years before, when a disaster unfolded with a hired yacht on the open sea and only two men made it to shore. Her daughter-in-law, Lady Mary, also died there and they left behind this one son, whom, by chance, they did not take out to play on the waves.

Agatia brought up her grandson, but what an upbringing!

The queen was defeated.

She was called the queen, although where on earth was her realm? Now she was on her own, they attacked her and she was defeated.

By and large, this was an old tale.

After the Crimean War, when the English landed on the islands of Santa Esperanza, deceived the Ottomans and already rendered the Russians dumbstruck, Colonel Rolston drew up a treaty with Agatia's great-grandfather, Sari Beg Pasha, between the Empire and the islands.

This was the result of much intrigue and in general nothing much seemed clear from the start, since until then in their reports the English called this region St John's Islands. As a result of the skilful negotiations that Rolston conducted, in secret from Sari Beg, with the illustrious nobles of the island – Visramianis, Karianis, Asadlianis, Nianianis, Matianis, the Genoan da Costa, Uso del

Mare, the Ottoman Jafar Bey and others – everyone received something. The Genoese retained their trading houses and demanded that the official name of the islands be Santa Esperanza, in an attempt to reinforce their ancient roots. The Vismarianis and Karianis secured a range of monopolies; Jafar Bey and Sinan Bey established legal rights more on a par with those of Ottoman merchants and this was also ratified by the English. Through these talks and agreements it became clear that Sari Beg's ancestors, the Archilianis, old hereditary governors and kings for seven centuries, were not to be found in the papers of state, unless as state officials appointed by the Ottomans. If indeed, from then on, the English, instead of the Ottomans, appointed the officials, they would never appoint Sari Beg to anything, his property seeming rather meagre when weighed against that of the illustrious noble families of the island.

Sari Beg looked all around him. He could see no one except his two hundred horsemen and, floating near to the island, a terrible iron ship that aimed its stout and malevolently gaping gun barrels exactly on his fortress and he signed Colonel Rolston's papers from right to left. According to Ottoman custom, the whole island belonged to Sari Beg, or Constantine Archiliani, to use his baptismal name, before he assumed the title of Pasha. Now the English leased the island from him.

Through this account Rolston also deceived the Ottomans. He had Sari Beg rummage through the ancient papers according to which it would be confirmed that King David the Builder did indeed give the island to his ancestors as their estate, with the rights of shore-dwelling dukes. Therefore, the Colonel portrayed the matter as though the Empire was renting the island from the Ottomans. In fact, it was leasing it from the Archilianis, but it repaid the money to the Ottomans because the Archilianis were no longer kings and were enlisted as Ottoman officials. The document was drawn up by means of English guile; the Ottomans did not let this guile go unnoticed, though the lease was so old and so valuable, too, that it would sustain their treasury. They thought 'Let it go: after a century and a half we might fight if it becomes a competition.' After all, they are experts at competing.

Once they had won over Sari Beg Pasha, the English appointed their own governor and sent in troops. Just a short time passed before two captains approached the former commander at the fortress and delivered the governor's request: 'Perhaps you might send us such documents as to confirm that the fortress is your patrimonial property. We are compiling a state archive and must have them.' Sari Beg turned out not to have such a document.

For the first time on Santa Esperanza they learned that property had to be documented. More precisely, they recognised that it was so very easy to rob someone using the power of the law. One peevish Visramiani eventually exploited this method with great pleasure, but at first the English were the brave men. Again the officers approached Sari Beg and delivered an order from the governor and colonel of the regiment: 'With your entire household, quit the citadel in three days, since it is of militarily strategic importance and we need it for the troops.'

Sari Beg acted foolhardily when he signed William Rolston's papers. What on earth could he do now? Long accustomed to familial concord, he descended from the mountain and went to the countryside, where there stood a charming house. Sari Beg was the owner of some considerable land and more than half the peasants used to work his land. However, within the next ten years it gradually became clear that he was not wealthy and that agriculture on the islands was slowly dying out. Merchants no longer respected Sari Beg and his aubergines and wheat.

He was left a common landowner and the single profitable thing he managed to do was to set up a golf club, through which he got a certain amount of income, since the English kept frequenting it and took all their guests as well.

Sari Beg Archiliani was recently deceased when the English granted the islands something resembling a constitution and they went so far as to omit the Archilianis from the highborn family names recorded in the constitution. The highborn family names were afforded great esteem and they safeguarded the advantages of citizenship, since from the start of the twentieth century jobs sprang up on Esperanza and fortune-seekers came flooding in. However, at the behest of the great clans, they could not acquire land or buy a house.

The governor's chancellor himself, Mr Twinkle, added the Tsikhistavi clan at the end of the list; he remembered and did not want any unnecessary clamour. All the same, the highborn families did not accept this postscript and, by kind permission of the governor, they established a simple, more jocular privilege for the Archiliani-Tsikhistavis: they could bestow any fine and elegant title upon anyone on the face of the earth whosoever wished it. The governor even set the tariff as well: if, of their own volition, the Archilianis granted someone a title, all well and good. If not, whosoever desired an Ioanian title had to pay the price.

Even after that, much time passed and did not lead to improvement or to change. All the same, the Archilianis preserved their middling means.

When the lawcourt-loving men sensed that Agatia was deserted, they attacked, since her late son, who was in fact a good businessman, left behind much unfinished business owing to his

unexpected demise, and they exploited the pitiful woman, who until then had been asked nothing about these affairs, during the time of either her husband or her son. There remained no benefactors; with difficulty, a crown advocate arrayed in green was appointed and he too proved to be a double-dealing man.

The result of such attacks was that she was left with an impoverished subsistence income and a separate sum that the plunderers magnanimously put down for the finest education of their former business partner's son.

She walked to the bank once a month. She was a wiry, hunched-shouldered old woman, black-clothed, veiled and often with a single earring. Fastened to her shoulder by an antique pin were two equally ancient peacock feathers, a symbol of prosperity, to be affixed to a headdress and presented by the Sultan to her ancestors, the Pashas. She would lean on an old silver-tipped men's walking stick, down the centre of which was hidden a long knife. She had no other walking sticks, otherwise this old weapon would seem heavy. Her reticule was glossy and split at the sides. She even had no servant.

Once a week she would roll a trolley brimming with groceries from the Turkish cornershop, which they opened directly opposite her house. She had credit here, because she could not get to grips with credit cards and had no need to: everyone knew that, whatever happened, she was the queen and a Tsikhistavi, although this no longer retained any significance.

Once that month, since upon leaving the bank there was money in her reticule, with her heavy walking stick tapping she proceeded towards a kahvehane in the Profit District called 'Ali Bey and Basila's Pipe'.

Once a month she could drink coffee as she pleased. Clearly she did not smoke the local pipes; English cigarettes she loved and always carried some in her *porte-cigarettes*.

The kahvehane proprietor, Morad Bey, used to come out to greet her with great reverence, personally drawing up a chair, immersing the coffee implements in the sand and blowing away the foam.

Morad Bey had great respect for the queen. He would call her *Khanum Khanumba*, nothing else, because he valued the history of the Tsikhistavis and after all his kahvehane was named after one of Agatia's doleful-eyed ancestors, Ali Pasha.

One small fragment of Ali Bey's pipe was left to Agatia. Morad Bey adored such fragments and the woman once said she would have a notary draw up a separate codicil, by which she would

bequeath the fragment to Morad Bey, who at the same time would receive the title of Pipe-Master Royal.

When Agatia brought the honorary charter of Pipe-Master Royal to Morad Bey, the latter all but fainted.

Morad Bey was so taken by the aforementioned accolade that he sent a letter to the old woman: 'In my kahvehane for you everything is on the house and you are welcome to come every day that dawns.'

However, just as before, the woman would come once a month, on a Wednesday, at ten o'clock in the morning. 'I would expect nothing else; *Khanum Khanumha* would not accept charity.' Once a month, on the last Saturday of the month, in the morning Agatia used to go for a stroll in the Shore District. But she did not go along the beaches, rather on the other side of the street, the side with the lemon trees. There she would perch on a bench and stare out to sea.

Here everyone had their own causes to stare at the sea or talk to the sea; those of the Archiliani-Tsikhistavis were unique. Centuries long they had been chained to this picture. As a noble bloodline they used to live in a fortress, which much resembled a flowerpot set upon a balcony. There was nothing else to look at. The last pasha, Sari Beg, who moved to the countryside by the edge of a forest at the island's centre, would likewise come to the sea once a month, gaze out at his former fortress, on top of which flew the British Standard, and would then stare out to sea as though in everlasting silence.

Message stowed in a bottle

Several sheets from the Governor's Keeper of the Archives, Samson Brass, 1893.

'The ruler of an island stands out from a ruler on the mainland. If this governance then becomes dynastic, the particular habits of the ruling clan take shape and this will influence their temperament. Land of their own, bounded by the sea, is sufficient for every island ruler. A single and chief exception undermines this notable characteristic: the British Empire. However, this world-mutating exception notwithstanding, you cannot escape the narrative that islanders are always contained by their own scrap of land.

And this is how it was for centuries on Santa Esperanza (formerly Saint John), where the greatest sin was very humble piracy and trade in captives. If we do not deem it a trade customary for the Middle Ages and we add that piracy would scarcely exceed a hundred miles – because going

further with local vessels was also perilous, since someone would attack you – the sea did not breach the serenity of the islands.

I dared to record my humble, banal reflections because of late I have thought a great deal about Kostantin Archiliani, that is Sari Beg, erstwhile governor of these parts, with whom I, a callow youth, had cause to communicate, just when our governance was being established on the island, and I, for my part, was one of the three scribes of the State Archive.

Sari Beg was the last ruler of Saint John's, who lost considerable property over the years, and at the end of his life decided he would bequeath his documents, whatever would be left after the churning turmoil of fate, some fifteen chests, not to the archive but to the Orthodox monastery of John the Baptist. He was brokenhearted at being governed, because not a single one of the three ruling governors in his lifetime esteemed his title and benevolence, each of them taking away something according to laws about which Sari Beg understood nothing. On the whole, he had absolutely no respect for the written word, which was supposed to be an oriental concern. 'Writing is worthless: one can just rinse it off and write it afresh,' he told me some thirty years ago, while trying to find some obscure documents in our archive in order to salvage his own forest. He was not able to find those documents at the time. However, he believed chivalrous, honourable agreement and the past to be law, which has become wholly fruitless in our time.

Sari Beg spoke impeccable Georgian, Turkish and Italian, which they informed me must have been some old Genoan dialect or other. Very effortlessly and swiftly he learned English most naturally, which is a distinctive trait of the islanders, since for centuries long they tended to speak several languages. He was a most honourable man who considered even an ant to be a person, but these traits of his were by no means befitting in modern times.

Sari Beg was a Muslim, otherwise he could not be the island's ruler. His ancestors were Muslims for three hundred years, which could be seen in their attire and style, albeit, by his own attestation, not a single one of them was circumcised; only their name changed and an oath of devotion was sworn.

They had been twice christened, since even in infancy they were baptised into Orthodoxy. I have not witnessed Sari Beg going to the mosque or ever say anything about his faith. Neither did he attend the temple and, although this is a private matter for a man, once I dared to ask, 'Towards which confession are you more predisposed?' He laughed and replied that his bloodline had ruled the islands for eight hundred years and that governance is such an office that it is unbecoming to be seen at prayer by others.

Here I recall that only once in thirty years did Sari Beg approach the governor's chancellery and his approach proved to be surprisingly opportune and thoroughgoing. Sari Beg suggested to the governor that public prayer be forbidden for all faiths on the islands and be permitted only during funerals. On the whole, Santa Esperanza passed such laws that doing anything in public was strictly forbidden and it seems to me that this ban is just, when people of so many nationalities live in such a small place. Everyone was left dissatisfied by this, although, after two years of negotiations, the governor passed a new law that to this day is called Sari Beg's Law. It forbade rituals and public processions, which not often but still occasionally became a cause of misunderstandings.

Sari Beg said, 'If you pray in public, you want others to emulate you; if others do not emulate you, you will harbour resentment in your heart. If you harbour resentment in your heart, what is the purpose of prayer?'

After his death, which was in the spring, they brought us copies of the papers that Sari Beg had left with the notary. It was a slim folio: the passport of a British subject, which Sari Beg had never used, and a third copy of his will. The old man's estate was somewhat meagre, but he left everything to his son on condition that he would later pass it on to his descendants. He was the final Santa Esperanzan, who obstinately shunned modern dress and wore completely unexpected clothes that might scarcely suit a person, yet suited him. He was never out of black. Black is not an Ottoman colour. A buttonless, thick, tight-fitting, short tunic, bound by tiny straps, suited him. Not that it was a tunic; it merely resembled a tunic. On his head he always wore something akin to an Ottoman turban, except very loosely wound, just as the peasants cover their heads when they are working in the field. His boots were sleek and bore a red band along the sole; his trousers though were wide, in the Ottoman style, of a thin fabric spread out like sackcloth. All this was most becoming, both in youth and beyond. I was also astounded by the clause in his will that left all the extant documents of the Archiliani bloodline to the monastery. He would also always remind his son that their bloodline had an escape hatch – the monastery. They had never made use of this escape hatch, but the time for this would come.

These words surprised me. Sari Beg was not such a man as to write something in vain. You will recall that he did not love writing and whatever he did write must have been a great trial.

Slowly but surely, in my spare time after work, I began to delve into the Archiliani-Tsikhistavis' past and discovered I was dealing with an exceptional bloodline. With a special petition I went to the monastery and, in accordance with the law, I requested they grant me permission to compile a list of the deeds of donation. The abbot gave me two days and left me alone with the

hitherto unsealed boxes. Had I been a young man, this would have troubled me, but now that I am indeed skilled at reading Monastic script, although many of the documents were drawn up in Greek, I managed it nevertheless. And a simple list was ample.

I discovered that most of the wealth on the islands is in fact in the monastery's vaults. I chanced upon most impressive lists of what the Archilianis have donated to the monastery over centuries. If you could imagine it all together, you could imagine nothing greater. Then again, if you could imagine that the Archilianis had not donated that which they did and over the centuries amassed it, I no longer know which of the sultans would be richer than they. It is unknown to me where the monastery took this treasure. Perhaps a great portion of it was conveyed to Constantinople or somewhere, yet if all of it is at this very moment on the island, then it is apparently El Dorado and it behoves me to keep this tale secret. Since if word gets out or someone persistent like me traces it to the graveyard of papers, then thousands of grave robbers and swindlers will flood into these parts, however nor will the locals hesitate to follow suit.

In light of such a discovery I began to view Sari Beg and his ancestors with fresh eyes. It is not yet a month since I finished my inventory of those boxes and now I am certain that the finest people of these parts were truly of the Tsikhistavi line. I have also discerned the fundamental signs of their character. As I mentioned, the centuries and circumstances moulded their character.

Generally, in the Middle Ages it was difficult to find a kind and forgiving ruler. Yet the Archilianis proved to be so. I suspect they were assisted in this by not going to war with anyone, even though they waited centuries for an enemy. When the King of Georgia appointed their first ancestor as the island's fortress commander and governor, they were appeased. Earthly ranks – dukedom and earldom – drive a man to dark thoughts. Neighbourly feuding is a common tale, but when you are confined on three small islands and know you have no neighbours, you will not be pressed into treachery.

The fortress stood in order to stall for a little time any sea-faring enemy, but the enemy did not appear, and when they did come into view, stopping them was meaningless, since there was no longer a country to defend, it having been fragmented and these fragments being governed by others. Thus, the Tsikhistavis readily complied with the Ottomans.

For the Ottomans these islands were a far-flung province.

Little by little the Tsikhistavis' imperturbability slid towards sorrow and a succession of kindnesses, about which various stories survive to this day. Fairy tales in this country are solely about the Tsikhistavis.

I could say much more, since I am gradually becoming more and more concerned about composing this letter. I do not know why I decided to write down my trivial opinions. I started so I might tell someone Sari Beg's story, but being accustomed to copying short official documents and such like, I could not manage this well.

Now I suspect that the sole thing of interest to anyone I have said in this writing is the story of the monastery's indescribable wealth, whose secret I was unable to keep since I have already written it. This is undoubtedly all that will interest people about my writing. What can one do? Such is their grabbing and greedy nature. Now I want to burn this letter but am no longer able to. Probably because I did not start writing it for this. Probably, as you grow older, you become soft-hearted. Yet, I wanted very much to set down something about the Tsikhistavis. I made an effort to research their past in detail and honestly and this I did willingly. Even at that time I did not agree with Sari Beg that writing has no value and I think, 'Why am I struggling to destroy my sabbath scrawlings?'

Probably because I mentioned the indescribable wealth there. I think I am repeating this thought for the third time and I sense that now I ought to behave as an Englishman and not as a Tsikhistavi. It is lamentable that I made such a decision, but I have just read a novel by a French writer, in which a letter in a bottle thrown into and borne by the water conferred on a wretched, disfigured youth the title of Lord.

It should not be difficult to cast this letter into the fire, but I am struggling with it. I struggle yet more with leaving the letter like this and it ending up in someone else's hands. Owing to my inexperience in laborious, verbose writing, I am at pains to express my feeling that does not allow me to destroy this letter. Probably this is the same spirit that drew Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh to mass. Here is where our story fades out.

All day yesterday I was thinking what I might do and realised I should ask one of the inspection crew's leaders, say Selden, whether on one occasion I might join their ship out into the open sea. It would be possible to organise the same with the fishermen, but they would be bemused. Well, I shall sling the bottle surreptitiously from the launch. I shall say this as though I yearn for the sea breeze. Even the weather is fair. Then again, perhaps rough seas are better for the bottle.

It will be so.

Often a pursuit begun with good intention usually unfolds into such an escapade. I think that all my namesakes are lovers of the perilous, but we dare not reveal it and it might seem that we

hate it. My undertaking has brought me to this dramatic conclusion and now I ask the finder, if indeed one does appear, not to think about me but rather about how virtuous a person can be. It reassures me that through my inexperienced penmanship I am giving the bottle's discoverer a means perhaps to witness the example of the Tsikhistavis and to peer closely while his own hand steals towards the gold.

I do not wish to mention my name and surname here. If, however, someone is dogged, they will find it in any case. I hope the bottle does not emerge during my lifetime and will not visit strife upon my daughter and son.

May God and Queen Victoria watch over you. 1893, autumn. Turbulent days.

God rest Sari Beg in heaven; surely he did not intend there to be in this world those who love to sift through papers.

Discoverer, pray for me. For my part, I promise you I shall not engage upon a quest for the monastery's treasure and I shall not share my discovery with anyone. I give you my word of honour that I shall not take up a pen to convey my notion and I shall have my wife write our family letters."

Agatia and the three strangers

'If you won't be angry with me, I want to ask you one thing, *Khanum Khanumha*.' Morad Bey understood precisely the old woman's foibles and said nothing before he had proffered some coffee and the woman had taken two sips from the cup.

While Agatia smoked a cigarette, Mora Bey drew nearer and his whiskers began to twitch:

'Look, do you see that man who is wearing sand-coloured shorts and with his spectacles perched on his brow? That man arrived here three days ago and told me in conversation that he was a friend of Mr Clever. Mr Clever is a most illustrious English writer and also my friend. In his book he dedicated a great chapter to our kahvehane. Perhaps you have already heard of it…'

'I have heard of it,' replied Agatia Khanum, 'It is a fine book.'

'Well, this man is a friend of that Mr Clever. He arrived from London. Apparently he is a journalist there and we… In a nutshell, that very day he told me that it is his long-held desire to converse with you. He has known of you for some time and has heard all about you… He is a man with long hair… He is a great admirer of us here. He is indeed from London, but he says he's a Frenchman…'

'I shall drink this coffee and then let him come,' replied the woman. 'Let him talk to me for a short while; as you know, Morad Bey, I am not noted for my great intellect.'

'What are you saying, *Khanum*, what are you saying…?' Morad Bey backed away.

'Today they have already addled my brain,' the woman muttered and reached for her cup.

The Frenchman's stout big toes could be seen protruding from his sandals under the table and he flung his rucksack on the chair beside him. Agatia thought this man no Frenchman. Such big toes could not possibly belong to a Frenchman, only to an Englishman.

'Théveneau de Morande.' He bowed his head to the old woman, as she gestured to Morad Bey that he could sit beside her.

'Why do you bow your head? You are not appropriately dressed and whyever is it necessary?' asked the woman and she pointed at the chair.

'The tourist season is upon us,' joked the Frenchman. 'I've known you for a long time, Baroness, from afar.'

'A baroness I am not…'

'Please forgive me this as well. We Frenchmen are not *au fait* with titles. That episode unfolded over two hundred years ago…'

The woman smiled wryly and slightly lifted her veil with two slightly quivering fingers.

'Since you are my guest, won't you have something to smoke or to drink? Here, some cigarettes.'

'Thank you, that is splendid tobacco, but I'll smoke my own. French tobacco is not for taste but for strength. I'm accustomed to it.' Morande pulled out his packet.

'I cannot bear French soot.'

'Ha, ha, that reminds me of an anecdote.' Morande puffed away. 'An anecdote that befell my German friend in Berlin. He fell in love with a Cuban student there and this woman did not spurn him and expressed her feelings. When the decisive evening arrived, they were sitting in a café and out of her bag the woman pulled a Cuban cigarette. Even now I remember the brand name 'Popular' and she offered it to the man. Cuban cigarettes are very potent; they will burn an unaccustomed throat and make one cough. The German smoked one and did not wish for another, but the woman pressed him again. And then again and again until the man could take no more and said, "Why are you making me smoke these abominable cigarettes? I can't take any more." The woman got up and slung her bag on her shoulder, "Apparently you cannot cope with Cuban tobacco. How will you cope with a Cuban woman?"'

'Did she leave?' Queen Agatia laughed quietly.

'She did…'

'That tale is a little wild but fine…' The Frenchman left her no time to draw breath.

'I am conscious of your time. I'm a journalist and I bring to light more political, submerged matters.'

'You must be a diver.'

'Not in the footballing sense… But that's how it is. I don't write articles; I simply sell stories. Such a profession does exist.'

'Yes, but I understand nothing about politics,' said the old woman.

'It's in your blood.' Morande laughed.

'I have leucocytes and erythrocytes in my blood,' retorted the woman. 'And I care very little about keeping them in order.'

'That's a remarkably political answer. Much is already clear to me.' Again the Frenchman laughed. 'Haven't you thought what might transpire when the English administration departs? Just six months and everything must change. A little over six months. We don't need to count them…'

'Nothing will change,' the woman asserted.

'Aren't you thinking of setting out some clear demands?'

'I am an old woman.'

'But your grandson is young.'

'I have forbidden him from returning here.'

'Why?'

'Because I did not want him to listen to such questioning.'

'You mean you've considered it.'

'I smoke just one cigarette here, Monsieur Morande, so please refrain from irritating my lungs.'

'Oh, no, no… If I have tired you out…'

'No, I simply do not want to smoke any more. If you think I will send a letter to the English asking them to return the throne to me, you are mistaken. Moreover, you should not think I might talk politics with the Turks, although you can see they idolise me in the Turkish community and Morad Bey and Tolumbash Bey Kirizim Oghlu treat me most gallantly. I shall say nothing about it to the Ioanians, nor to the Genoans, nor to anyone at all. For this narrative came to an end a long time ago and I lost everything in life except my grandson. Yet here you are saying something to me about an extinct kingdom.'

'Oh, absolutely not. I truly did not want to… Let me treat you to something, perhaps you might desire something. Morad Bey!' Morande was flustered.

'You will not be able to pay,' whispered the woman conspiratorially. 'You came to sit at my table, so I invited you. Therefore, they will not accept your money.'

'In that case, let's move to my table.' The Frenchman roared with laughter.

'If only it were that easy.' It seemed the old woman was relishing this. 'An Archiliani will not fall so far that she cannot feed a traveller…'

They laughed.

Next to the counter sat a delighted Morad Bey.

'Generally speaking, something is afoot,' said Agatia all of a sudden, 'Something is afoot. Today as I came out of the bank, some sky-blue-shirted man rushed up to me and knelt down. People gathered around… With some effort they lifted him up. I cannot lift others if I cannot lift myself…'

'He knelt before you?'

'Indeed. He knelt down and they lifted him up with much effort. I think he was lying in wait for me there.'

'Lying in waiting for you?'

'He was an Englishman.'

'Oho! An Englishman. An Englishman on his knees…'

'He caught up with me at the mosque and implored me to bestow some sort of title on him. He probably knew that this prerogative is mine.'

'What madness!'

'I told him I could not stay a long time at the mosque, since I am a woman and I do not think it appropriate to stand there where the men were intending to pray. He talked to me on the way…'

'My God, you must have been scared to death.'

The old woman glowered at Théveneau de Morande.

'Monsieur Morande, you should not engage in my conversation with such flattery. This is a lie. Had I a heart, it would have burst before now…'

'Truly I'm astonished.'

'Tell me this: what have you heard about the Seven Cities?'

The Frenchman raised his eyebrows. 'What does that mean?'

'I do not know either; more precisely, I did not know. It is said I am Queen of the Seven Cities. So told me the Englishman who asked me for the title of Armourer… Apparently he came here to enter into my service.'

'Well, here's a tale…'

'Indeed. He was waiting for me at the bank and said, "Henceforth, you have a slave." It turns out I have a slave.'

'Did he say where he had been until now?'

'He said he waited for the sign of the Seven Cities and now the time has come to defend the Seven Cities. I told him there is one city here.'

'These Seven Cities…'

'Oh, he told me such tales as an insane man can tell an old woman in five minutes. It is said that seven bishops from Spain went to some island and founded seven cities. That island was supposedly Santa Esperanza. But no one knows…'

'Ahh,' the Frenchman struck the table with the palm of his hand, 'Ahh, I do recall. The island that's nowhere to be found. That is, we don't know where it is, so whoever sailed there must all have remained…'

'Quite. This man is insane.'

'Indeed, he must be a mystical calculus lunatic.'

'I do not believe that. I told you not to engage in my conversation. The man is like you, resembles you somewhat…'

Morande seemed not to hear: 'If you'll allow me: from now on you will have a truly faithful slave. Such incidents are widely known. As a matter of fact, I am going to bother you greatly. But what can be done?'

The old woman fell silent a short while and then said, 'It is self-evident. However, I do not think this to be true.'

They conversed for twenty minutes more, Morande questioning Agatia *Khanum Khanumha* on diverse matters. In the end, the woman spoke, 'Now I must go…'

Morad Bey, observing that the woman intended to stand up, came nearer and drew back her chair.

'Thank you, Morad Bey.' The old woman smiled and showed the Frenchman her walking stick. 'There is a stiletto concealed in its handle. Regrettably I have no other, although I can still defend myself.'

Tic-tac-tic… Tic-tac-tic…, as she went along.

'How majestic she is!' Morad Bey's gaze fixed on her as she left the kahvehane.

'Madam is an aristocrat,' Théveneau de Morande concurred.

'She is the sole noble on this island; the rest of us are all merchants.'

Agatia Tsikhistavi Archiliani clattered home along her customary path.

'Why do they plague me?' By no means was she faint-hearted, but all the same walking was effortful and with difficulty could she glance behind. She was a pale, most wiry woman, clad in black.

It was now time to go to the cornershop. Her trolley stood in the hallway. Stubbornly she would haul her purchases to the first floor, even though the Ottoman always used to send along a boy. The boy would escort the old woman over the road and would stand in the hallway until he could no longer hear the sound of her door. What else could he do, when the woman would in no way share her load with him?

It was empty in the cornershop and the Ottoman's wife dutifully helped the old woman to load her trolley. She also knotted the tops of the bags.

'Ahmed,' she called out to the thirteen-year-old boy sitting on a box, 'Go along with the *Khanum*.'

The boy got up; Agatia carefully rolled the trolley through the shopkeeper's open door. 'Ahmed, go and eat some plums. It is better than tailing an aged woman,' she joked to the boy and at that moment caught sight of a portly man, dressed for summer but dourly, as he ran across the street and reached for the trolley.

'Let me assist you, ma'am.'

'Do not trouble yourself… I do not…'

But the man paid no attention and almost wrenched the trolley from her hand.

'What do you mean, ma'am?' His strength showed in his wrists.

'This is unnecessary.' The old woman grabbed at the handle, but the man rolled the trolley down the street at speed. Ahmed witnessed this and slipped through the shop door.

'God save us! What hell is this today?' said Agatia, realising only then that her walking stick was lying on the trolley.

All the same she crossed the street and slightly angered said to the man who had come to halt, 'Thank you very much, sir. Trouble yourself no more.'

'Where do I go from here?' The man paid no attention.

'Wheresoever you wish, but leave me my trolley.' The woman became infuriated.

'I know where I have to go,' said the man suddenly, appearing somewhat imposing, somewhat elegant, somewhat severe. He could not be forty, more likely thirty-five.

'Is that so?'

'Yes, ma'am… I know whom I have assisted. I need your assistance. The commander sent me…' The man opened the hallway door with his back and deftly dragged the trolley inside.

At six o'clock in the evening they brought a telegram to Agatia Archiliani Tsikhistavi: 'Lodging at Rigot Hotel. Member of Your Majesty's Historical Society, J. Perigo. I desire an audience. You do not answer the phone. I request a consultation meeting. Cost of return telegram has been paid. With utmost respect, Perigo.'

'Well…' and nothing more did the Queen of the Ioane Islands say to herself.

Introduction

A travelling case, playing cards and a thousand odds and ends

> Close scrutiny must be paid by anyone who has resolved to read these notebooks, since all the diverse tables of contents of this book of notebooks are set down right here, and without these tables of contents, you will not be able to make head or tail of what follows — though, by and large, it is not essential to make head or tail of it.

The first time I washed up in Santa Esperanza, or the Ioane Islands, I was there for four days in 1997. I decided to travel there incidentally from Istanbul, but I had neither the time nor the money to stay longer. The simple visa policy made it much easier for me, since as is customary in holiday destinations, you could visit for a fortnight without a visa. After two weeks, you had to go to the police, passport in hand, and explain how much longer you wanted to be there and have a list of reasons for staying. If you intended to work, you had to show proof from your workplace, and so on.

At the time, I only spent four days in Santa City, otherwise known as Citadel Saint John, but there I was seven years on, flying in again, although it was more of a hassle this time than on that first arrival.

No, the visiting rules still applied, but under these rules, only Debordered European and British citizens were able to enter without a care, while other varieties of tourist had to obtain their visa beforehand, otherwise they wouldn't be granted entry, not even for two weeks.

The Europeans have forgotten even what a visa is; they simply come and go on their own continent. But for someone who has a Georgian passport in his pocket, every arrival and departure bristles with a variety of absurd documents, where his own eye colour must at times be verified in

writing, not to mention that he must honestly record who packed his bag — his wife or his mistress — and if he was present when this bag was packed, since it's possible that his wife has hidden a bomb or some poisonous capsules in one of the bag's pockets.

The holder of such a passport must indicate on one of these documents exactly where, at which address and on what kind of income he intends to live, and so on, endlessly.

Fine, but how can a traveller know where the night will find him?

A traveller is one who travels, but the way things have turned out, unless you are a Border-Erased European it's hard to travel, since Debordered Europe asks you: *why* are you travelling? To be a traveller, you must have your income recorded in some document or other.

All of this goes without saying, but in any case, Santa Esperanza does not belong to Debordered Europe; it lies in the Black Sea. There was a war there, however, which may be why they grew stricter regarding the unchecked flow into their country of citizens from the Europe which is beyond the frontiers of Debordered Europe, which I suppose is not exactly Europe.

But where should one get a visa for Santa Esperanza? This small country has no embassy or consulate in Georgia, nor, I believe, in Russia. You have to scour Santa Esperanza's tourist websites for the answer. I looked there, and I found it, too.

It turned out that this country does not have ambassadors. Like many places which were once plots of land held by the English and which are still part of the Commonwealth now, the Most High Commissioner for these three small islands sits in London, with the same rank as a consul. A Most High Commissioner from Britain also sits in Citadel Saint John, whereas in Istanbul, if you look hard enough, you will find a man who could be considered the consul of Santa Esperanza and, moreover, he may give you a visa which will grant you entry to this country as a non-European European, since perhaps you are not entirely European. This man in this position is also called the Most High Commissioner.

Once I saved up all the money required, I planned, without a doubt, to go to the islands. Flying from Tbilisi to London requires its own visa, and then having reached the city, the further hardship of getting the Ioanian visa; I chose instead the hardship of going to Turkey, crossing the border easily and finding the institution in Istanbul where the aforementioned commissioner is supposed to be sitting.

The commissioner had no love for Georgians; he didn't like us since we'd started converting to Europeanism. It seems he had his reasons, but he didn't bother to explain himself. Surprisingly, he himself was Georgian, although he was speaking to me in English.

I slipped a couple of Georgian words into the conversation, since I lacked them in English. He answered in English that he didn't understand this kind of Georgian, since he spoke Ioanian.

Three hours later, he called me back in, and on my return he questioned me for twenty minutes: what did I do for work and what exactly did I want with a six-month visa? I answered him as well as I could, but it was like taking an exam: he was asking me things about the history of his country. I answered very vaguely, since the one and only thing I'd ever read about this state's past was Nebieridze's brochure. Apparently, he had already granted me the visa and stamped it in my passport, too, but he didn't disclose this to me.

Finally, he handed me my passport and told me that it's better to travel by boat. In fact, it turned out to be cheaper.

So I went to the Ioane Islands for the second time and stayed there for half a year.

I lived in a rented flat in the Shore District for the last two months.

It was already February when I had to return home, although over here winter is wonderful and you don't even think of the cold. It's possible that the humidity makes the climate more accommodating. This humidity is also worse in the places hemmed in by the sea, less so in the inner

city. The sea is stormy and for a width of twenty feet along the coast, it even seems like it's raining. The sun is rare, though still delicious. Such is winter in Santa City.

During this half-year I almost became a local. It's true I only learned to speak proper Genuese and Turkish at a third-rate level, but Ioanian was a piece of cake and, to be honest, I now prefer speaking this particular Georgian dialect over my native tongue.

I had already made many friends and found it hard to leave. I often cabled my wife, "I've found a place, we could go and settle down." I could (and still can) find work extremely easily. My wife cabled back, "Things are happening in Georgia, people have started protesting." Obviously, I was worried about this, but do you know what kind of city I was living in?

I was living in the kind of city which had experienced a war one year earlier, but the war had left no trace. Citadel Saint John, popularly known as Santa City, is the kind of city which will digest anything. Not by malice or conflict, but rather through its own immortality and magic. Don't think that I'm a tourist, I'm not speaking as a tourist: I know everything from the inside. I have always been trying to invent a city, but it had already been invented. On that first flying visit, I realised this, and during all those years I often thought, "Well, will a time come when I manage to return here?"

I returned, and now I was going home already: by sea again to Trabzon, and from there by land towards Georgia.

It was very hard to return, but I also found it hard to be without my family, although they are practically used to me disappearing only to return who knows when. So you see, now I was returning and, like a decent man, I started to put my baggage in order approximately ten days before my journey.

Living here, I never let a day go by without writing something. On the Ioane Islands, they sell very beautiful, slim notebooks. They have delicate covers and they really resemble the twelve-page jotters from my childhood, only even narrower in width. I had almost two hundred of these notebooks, all filled with different stories. I would often summarise stories from local history books and newspaper cuttings. I used to scribble down everything they told me, and often I myself brought to an end anything they said which was incomplete or partial. Many, many stories piled up. How could it be any different? I heard many, many things and I kept writing and writing in these notebooks. All varied, they were a confused jumble of stories; while hearing and writing them, I thought a great deal, and it seems to me, I got the measure of the life of the Ioanians.

These hundred plus notebooks (when I finally counted, there were a hundred and forty-one) were solid luggage. I couldn't shake my old habit, my love of writing in new, clean notebooks. I'd rather die than continue writing on old scrap paper, I always have to start with a new page. So you see, that's another reason why they piled up in this quantity. They were cheap too, three pence. Counted all together, they couldn't have cost more than three local pounds.

But if this talk of notebooks isn't stopped, it'll never end. As a matter of fact, I found a use for the notebooks. In general, everything began from this use, otherwise I couldn't have put together a book from these notebooks, I wouldn't have even thought of it. Just like you collect anything, you have to collect stories in order to come up with a plot fit for a book.

Or I was thinking: right now, the invention starts. I often spend a very long time coming up with things: two years plus another seven, perhaps, then suddenly I write it all down.

Five days before my departure, a local friend gave me a deck of playing cards. These are the most popular gift from the island: the most famous souvenir is just a pack of playing cards, and the ones for playing and the ones for giving barely resemble each other at all.

The fact is that leaving Santa Esperanza without this gift is impossible. At that time, I intended to buy one for myself, but the souvenir decks have their own catalogue and price, and acquiring a truly distinguished keepsake will cost you a lot. I couldn't afford the ones I liked

anymore, and it was hard to choose between the ordinary ones. I shouldn't have left this task until the last minute, but you know how it is, right?

See, before I could decide, my friend gave one to me as a present: he put it on a table in the cafe, right under my nose, and said, "It's yours, use it however you like."

It was expensive, and I was really blown away. Well, how could it be that someone simply gives you a seven hundred pound deck of cards?

I baulked, but he turned over the box of cards and showed me the inscription.

There's a rule here: often the client's name is written on the box of cards, and they are only able to do that when the cards are made to order by a master craftsman.

My friend reassured me that the gift had been ordered a month and a half ago, and the money wasn't just his; the boys from the club contributed, too.

I often used to go to their club. My friend was called Little Matalo, and he was the son of the club's owner. That must be why he had said to me back in the autumn, "Don't buy one, you don't know how to choose."

I was still really blown away, though it also really delighted me, since the price and the pictures meant that I wasn't as insignificant and dissolute as I thought.

Then I left and, don't be surprised, within a week of arriving in Tbilisi, I set off for London.

Why? Because it struck me that I had already written the book. When such things strike me, it also strikes me that whatever takes a year in Tbilisi often takes a week somewhere else.

I had no money left at all, but a married couple I knew gave me shelter in the suburbs of the big city. I won't name them now, nor do they need me to, but they're always the ones who give me shelter when I notice that I've gone completely out of my mind and I love my native city so much that I hate it already.

Once I flew to London, I already knew what my target was. This target was also precisely the stratagem which I had mulled over around midnight in the Shore District, as follows:

Monica drove me home and told me that she would come to the port on the day of my departure. She's a good companion of mine and generally a cool girl, too, as people there say, on good terms with the mirror. All the same, Monica always takes her leave of us with these words:

"I have no luck with men."

In short, I went up to my room and, lying down, I started to examine the cards. I had a novel, too, Jessica de Raider's "Gorge of the Many-Coloured Waters," but by midday I hadn't yet opened the gift box, so I settled down to examine it.

I'd seen more local playing cards than I could count, but these were different.
On the whole, it's important to mention that the game called Inti, which is popular on the islands, is not played anywhere else. Typical Inti playing cards have different symbols from the French ones, and they've lost their colours, too: in other words, they aren't red and black.

There are four suits in local cards, but there are no hearts, diamonds, clubs or spades. They've been replaced by the local ethnography, with suits called vines, blackberries, thistles and swords.

Now, I know well why the swords cropped up from so many grasses. The vine is represented by a bunch of grapes; a single blackberry stands for the blackberries, whereas a loathsome thorny flower represents the thistles, which we call weeds and which grow so very high on country lanes. There are 36 cards in a local deck, only a proper game is played with two packs. Clearly, there were 36 in a gift pack, too. In other words, in order to really heat things up in proper Inti, you need 72 cards; or, as we say in our own flippant way: it takes two to tango.

I can't explain the rules, since I don't know the game very well. There are only nine cards in each suit. Here there is no woman, grandfather, ace (the so-called 'big shot'), king, or queen, although there are four women, as well as four men, four horned cattle and various other objects

and things. Centurions, drinking horns and boats. If in ordinary cards, hearts and diamonds (what we call 'bricks') are considered good and pretty suits, in Inti cards, it's the vine and the blackberry. The remaining two are known as evil and unlucky suits.

I was sitting and examining the cards.

In Santa City, the craft of illustrating these cards is a big deal, and the real deal. The illustrations are very naive and mystically attractive. While I was looking at them, they reminded me of Pirosmani. Everything was drawn in such a way that it couldn't be otherwise, you couldn't avoid this reminder. Every master has his own style, although he can also work in others. I myself have been in the workshops where they illustrate the gift cards.

I was looking through the illustrations for a long time, I looked and looked, I even dozed off once. Then I got up and arranged them according to number and suit on the table. Why I acted like this, I don't know, but I laid out first the vines, then the blackberries, then the thistles and finally the swords. I started with the ones, and continued all the way to the men. It turned out like an oblong, a quadrangular picture. Cards for giving are usually bigger than the ones for playing. Laid out like so, they were even finer to look at, it was as if one picture was coming out.

It ought to be this way, too, since they paint the gift-worthy cards on one big board, and cut it into thirty-six pieces afterwards. That's how cards were made in the old days and maybe it's the same in the factories, too. I don't know, I can't say anything about that.

In other words, in the beginning, it was one piece, and then it was cut.

In the Shore District in the winter, the story usually goes that you fall asleep to the sound of the waves, but before you fall asleep, you think only of good, good things. In Porta Nova Street, the condition of winter is such that…ah, but I won't go on anymore. In that drowsiness, I thought it would be an ingenious move to give the notebooks, written and collected by me, the appearance and structure of the playing cards on the table. Each notebook would have on its cover the illustration of each playing card: one for every notebook.

At that time it didn't yet seem to me like I had written the book, I simply thought I should commit this story to my notebooks and immortalise the Ioanian playing cards on the covers.

I also realised that this would be just the beginning of the ingenuity. When such a thing comes into your head, it'll definitely find a way to keep going.

In Trabzon, my good friend Ahmed Kaia met me. I called him earlier, when I was in Istanbul, and he came to see me there. How could we bear to avoid each other when we hardly ever get to catch up?

In childhood, we played basketball together. Then it happened that he left and went far away, and Ahmed became Ahmed Kaia. He hadn't been in Istanbul when I was on my way to Esperanza. Who can understand his wanderings?

Looking back on Ahmed Kaia's brutal past life, I'm unable to describe it now, but it so happened that we went into an inn and had our fill of giggling in our time-honoured way that will often descend into mutual mockery, which means that we miss each other. I started the narration of this story.

It came out of me involuntarily. It often happens that a story of something weighs heavily on you, and for a long time you don't tell anybody, then you try to pour out your heart all at once to the first person you encounter. Ahmed Kaia was not the first person I encountered, but he was a pal, and all the better for it, since I would be jabbering endlessly.

Ahmed Kaia had heard of the islands, but had never been there. He had a Turkish passport and could get there more easily than a Georgian, as he affirmed yet again, saying "Let's go together, I'll call you in Tbilisi." Together, we planned this event for the next year, while I kept talking about the cards and the notebooks. I showed him Little Matalo's gift, and he spent a long time examining the pack.

My innovation was this:

I had nearly a hundred and fifty notebooks, while there were only thirty-six cards. I had to edit the notebooks and move the entries around, shorten them or do away with some of them entirely, so that there would be thirty-six left of them, too.

Needless to say, I could do this without cutting anything from the entries. I could divide the hundred and forty-one into thirty-six and fit almost four notebooks into each new one, and then give them the cards' names, but this would make the notebooks much thicker. I didn't want very thick notebooks, since playing cards are thin, after all.

I told all of this, in a more picturesque fashion, to Ahmed Kaia, who doesn't even read newspapers, let alone books. Not even Turkish ones, you know? But once upon a time, Ahmed Kaia was a general. He even won a battle with his own troops. Ahmed Kaia had also been a bandit, the worst, and he can usually identify the target in all sorts of matters.

This is common for people with his build. They always know where the target is, and where they must hit it, since they can't survive any other way. Now Ahmed Kaia isn't a bandit anymore, but rather the owner of a small shop, but he still holds onto his wolfish ways, which means he can find the precise location of an enemy's jugular. These ways are everlasting, after all. For him, every event is an enemy which he must defeat.

I was recounting this to him, and he suddenly asked me, "What d'you want this for?"

In his language, this means, "What d'you *need* this for?"

I told him that it was interesting, but he said that there is no point in forcing these notebooks into playing cards without a goal. Why should there be a book in these separate notebooks when there is no goal behind these separate notebooks? Besides, isn't it usually better to make one book from the bundled-up stories?

He didn't say these exact words, but that was how it sounded, and there was no escaping what he said. After all, I was thinking the same way, too.

"They're cards, right?" Ahmed Kaia looked at the illustrations, "Go on, go ahead, now lay them out like they're supposed to be. In four sections each rank from low to high, and the suits side by side…"

We moved the plates aside, rearranged the bottles, cleaned up the place and lined up the cards in four columns: first the vine cards, according to value, then the blackberries, the thistles and the swords.

Ahmed Kaia was smoking and staring. He usually smoked cigarettes calmly, not nervously, and when he was smoking he often looked like a thoughtful man.

"What's a card?" he asked me suddenly. "Really, what is it? A game, I think."

"What do these cards have in common? The suit, right? The rank…again…again, four sixes, four sevens…"

"There aren't any sixes, the count is different…"

"Four ones, right? Twos, and so on, right?"

"Right."

"And then?"

"And then, nine, ten, a big fat hen."

"There's some stories in those notebooks which, let's say, should follow one rank, right? Like one suit, from beginning to end," Ahmed Kaia ran a finger along the column of blackberries… "If you want them to be like cards, the stories must be like cards. You say that they paint them on one board first, then cut it. You can cut the crap, too: paint on one board first and then cut it, so they look like each other in rank and number. That's what cards are, nothing more. There're all sorts of games, but all these games, they're played with the same cards, 'coz there's the rank and everything's in groups of four…"

Ahmed Kaia said no more, but I kept speaking. I wasn't talking about the content of the notebooks, but rather how to arrange the notebooks in order to come up with four groups of nine, according to the suits. Four stories, lined up in single file.

"Not just that way," Ahmed Kaia shook his head and lit a new cigarette, "Here's the deal…Not just one long deal, but a short one, too. There're nine cards in a suit, right? Four cards of each number. Here're four ones, right? Here're four twos, four…whatever number it is. It shouldn't only be that way, all the stories should go this way, too…"

It was enough to make you whistle.

Not just four stories; add nine on top of four, so that the story should go vertically, and horizontally, too. I did whistle.

"That's the deal with cards, 'coz so many games're played with one packet," Ahmed Kaia told me firmly, as he saw me off on my way to Tbilisi the next day.

Well, how could I not go to London?

Surely you can see how much Ahmed Kaia knows?

He'll call from time to time and say, "It's a good mate from the old days…Guess who?" He never says his old name on the phone, or his new one either. He's a fugitive and a madman: so much so that, even today, he is often remembered with fear and loathing.

"Just calm down and go," they told me at home. Could it really be so simple for us? It's not like the olden days, after all, when a man would take off to seek his fortune. On top of that, I would be scrounging around in the bottom of my wallet. Even had there been more to scrounge up, I didn't want to speak on the phone and write emails to my wife and kid. But still, that's what usually happens when I take off.

As my wife says, I seem a more decent man from far away than I really am; less so from up close, I get my feathers ruffled easily. That's why I only let people get near to me slowly. When they approach, I pack my bags. It's not like everyone knows our secrets. By the grace of God, friends can be found here and there, too, people of various nationalities and dispositions.

I didn't even leave my room that first month in London. I went to the stadium once and that was that. The hosts said I was like the hero of a German story, or even more like a poltergeist. Like in an old *pensione*, they put the food by the door. In brief, to them I was like the invisible man in H.G. Wells's book, I think he's called Griffin. Except for the fact that I wasn't sneaking out at night to steal from the bishop's house, like he does.

I sat and wrote inventories.

For each entry and each small fragment, I found a title and wrote it down, along with what I could surmise of what was written in the notebooks. In the same way, I also found a title for each of the thirty-six cards.

On the St John Islands, they are designated by one word each, but this would be very short for a title, so I invented a longish, descriptive name for each card. From the start, I thought of Pirosmani, and I used names like the ones his paintings have. For example, "Sarkis Pouring Wine," or "Shete Stealing a Horse," or "Childless Millionaire and the Poor with Children."

That's nothing. Most important was the scissors job, that is, setting out the stories so they crossed over each other. It was a finicky task. I had a big pair of scissors. I sat, I cut, and I pasted together the Esperansian notebooks. I cut and pasted left and right.

In the midst of this pasting, it struck me how much there was to write. In general, many records got left out, although I haven't thrown them away yet. I reworked a lot of them. I bound three into one, I split one into three, and I was wrapped up in this, until I really got it to resemble what Ahmed Kaia was talking about.

How I got that resemblance is another story. I sort of understood what film directors usually do when they lock themselves away in the cutting room for a whole month. Except they are faced with another problem: they can't film anything else, but it's always possible to write more.

One way or another, I couldn't manage to arrange the Ioanian stories (old and new, invented, true and abridged) any better. Somehow, I wrangled these hundred and forty-whatever notebooks down to thirty-six, and I connected them to each other.

Obviously, I bestowed on each chapter the name of each card, except for four long stories, and nine shorter ones, which I gave separate titles.

Amidst this chaos, I discovered that I had composed the notebooks in such a way that it wasn't necessary to tie them together, since each notebook in turn will represent one separate little story.

In other words, it turned out like this: four long stories, plus nine short stories, plus thirty-six little stories. So you could pull out any one notebook from the pack and read it as a separate booklet; that is, it's no longer necessary to read the other stories.

Somehow it turned into a grab-bag of fairy tales…

I was pretty content with this state of affairs, but I wasn't swept away with pleasure. I went back to editing again, and into all this toing and froing I now have to add these collected tables of contents, by which the thirty-six notebooks can also be read. Only this didn't turn out to be the very end, which I'll tell you about soon.

Well, finally, here's the table of contents of this book of notebooks, garnished with a short discussion:

The first suit of Esperansian cards is vines, otherwise known as bunches of grapes. The vine cards start with one bunch, which is also the lowest symbol, and come to an end with the highest symbol, the headman, who holds a hoe in one hand and a bunch of grapes in the other.

In short, this column of nine vines is called the "Book of Echoings," and in it, there is no lovey-dovey stuff or those thousand other bits and bobs which books need nowadays. Instead, it narrates the ancient history and life of the Ioane Islands, otherwise known as Santa Esperanza. In it, there are mixed-up story lines, which have endured, unforgotten by the people down the centuries, and some secret crumbs are scattered inside, too, which must give the reader the strength to leaf through the other notebooks.

The table of contents of this nine-part register looks like this:

Book of Echoings:

1. Bunch of grapes
2. Two houses festooned with bunches of grapes
3. Three oxen with bunches of grapes on their horns
4. Two yoked oxen hauling bunches of grapes
5. Five hoes and bunches of grapes
6. Girl with pitcher and bunches of grapes
7. Goat with basket full of grapes
8. Ox drinking horn and bunches of grapes
9. Headman with hoe and ox drinking horn

In the Esperansian game, the next suit is blackberries. It starts with one handful of blackberries and comes to an end with a peasant, who is standing next to a burning blackberry bush.

In this column, the life of a dissolute young man in Santa City is described, although it would be awkward to say more about it here, in the contents section. This whole blackberry story is named:

The Book of the Obedient Faithful Servant's Wretched Exile on the Shores of the Black Sea

Likewise its table of contents looks like this:

1. One handful of blackberries
2. Blackberry bush and two hands
3. Three whetstones and a basket full of blackberries
4. Four blackberry bushes
5. Five binoculars and a blackberry bush
6. Basket full of blackberries and a widow
7. Donkey with a basket full of blackberries
8. String of dried blackberries
9. Peasant with a burning blackberry bush

The third suit follows, the thistles, also called thorny weeds on these islands, as I told you. This column starts with an ordinary thistle flower and comes to an end with a faithful servant, lighting a pipe with a burning thistle. Here I have to make clear that "Sha(e)rmadin" doesn't refer to or imply a proper name, either here or in the previous book. The story itself is called "The Book of the Ill-Starred Panther," and in it — nudge, nudge, wink, wink — there's salacious banter about women's fortunes.

Book of the Ill-Starred Panther:

1. Thistle flower
2. Two sickles and a thistle flower
3. Boat full of thistles with three oars
4. Large boat with a cannon and sheaves of thistles
5. Lightning bolt from the sky and burning thistles
6. Young lovers in a field of thistles
7. Mule eating thistles
8. Pipe and thistle
9. Faithful servant lighting a pipe with a burning thistle

And at the same time here's the fourth nine-parter, which is cut in the pattern of the sword, only it starts with a black-handled knife and comes to an end with a fortress commander wielding a sword in his right hand. As in all swashbuckling stories, the whirling of swords is in full swing here, too, and some begin their lives here, while others end them.

That's why this swashbuckling story is called:

The Book of Fleeing and Dying

Its contents follow the already-familiar column, from the first to the last card:

1. Black-handled knife
2. Two blind spies with swords
3. Three sighted spies
4. Centurion with two swords and two daggers
5. General's hat and five swords
6. Woman in a bashlyk with a sword
7. Pouch, whip and sword
8. Swords on a bearskin
9. Fortress commander with a big sword

These are the tables of contents of the four nine-part stories, now let's carry on with the rest below, since the writing of tables of contents is renowned for its goodness.

By sorting things out one way or another, I ended up with some four-parters, too, and gave titles to these nine stories; that is, the books of vertical stories are followed by the books of horizontal stories. These are short stories; these nine four-parters were forged by going horizontally across those four nine-part stories. Of course, mathematics is such that the nine four-parters are also equal in capacity to the four nine-parters. It would be astonishing if it turned out differently! Four nine-parters and nine four-parters are also equal in capacity to thirty-six small, separate stories. I was fascinated by this kind of mathematics once again whilst in London, when it got rainier.

The notebooks in the nine four-part books are exactly the same as the ones in the four nine-parters, they're just read in a different order, according to the numbers on the cards. For example, following the ones of the classic Ioanian suits: one of grapes, one of blackberries, one of thistles and one of swords. This row of ones is named:

The Notebooks of the Love of the Solitary Genoan and in it are gathered portraits of the life of a young man, which seem to tell a story that ends like such stories often do in books.

The four notebooks should be arranged in this way:

1. Bunch of grapes
2. One handful of blackberries
3. Thistle flower
4. Black-handled knife

After this story, just like a cocooning blanket comes a second four-part story, the one of all the twos. There, too, bits of the life of a young man are told, a man who knows that young man whose story is told in the first four-parter (that is, in the Genoan notebooks). This part is titled:

The Book of the Solitary Intier, where "Intier" means "card player" in Ioanian.

The notebooks' arrangement is customary:

1. Two houses festooned with bunches of grapes
2. Blackberry bush and two hands
3. Two sickles and a thistle flower
4. Two blind spies with swords

Next come the adventures and torments of the solitary Intier's one true love, and the next four-parter is called:

Stories of the Mourners and of Life

The notebooks of this row look like this:

1. Three oxen with bunches of grapes on their horns
2. Three whetstones and a basket full of blackberries
3. Boat full of thistles with three oars
4. Three sighted spies with swords

And since many countries had queens, the story across the row of fours is presented without delay, and titled:

Account of the Last Three Hundred and Fifty Days of the Queen of the Seaside

Lined up, the four notebooks are:

1. Two pairs of yoked oxen hauling bunches of grapes
2. Four blackberry bushes
3. Large boat with cannon and sheaves of thistles
4. Centurion with two swords and two daggers

In general, Inti is the kind of game where one short adventure, even the one of the solitary Intier, wouldn't be enough, and that's why the four-parter of the fifth row was created:

The Pursuits of the Standard-Bearer's Descendant:

1. Five hoes and a bunch of grapes
2. Five binoculars and a blackberry bush
3. Lightning bolt from the sky and burning thistles
4. General's hat and five swords

Here I have to admit that whilst living in Santa City, I went more than once to the local history museum, which can be found in the ancient fortress. The museum's director, who is like its chairman or president, was a famous old man on the islands, but he never went inside the museum anymore. Monica, who was also close to Mr. Chairman's family, told me his story, and that's how we came up with:

The Days of the Last Heir to the Name

Whose four notebooks also include a row of feminine cards in this order:

1. Girl with pitcher and a bunch of grapes
2. Basket full of blackberries and a widow
3. Girl and boy in love in a field of thistles
4. Woman in a bashlyk with a sword

It wouldn't be right for an itinerant like me not to notice the other itinerants in the city and not to hear their stories. Perhaps many things were added to their stories, and perhaps they may seem like fairy tales to the reader, but the fact is, I couldn't turn my back on these people. That's why the following was compiled:

The Chapbook of the Life of the Holy Fool

In which four notebooks are bound:

1. Goat with a basket full of grapes
2. Donkey with a basket full of blackberries
3. Mule eating thistles
4. Pouch, whip and sword

I couldn't turn my back on these itinerants; more so, I couldn't omit their king. Let the reader think it's made-up or nonsense if he wants to, but this much I know: that many walk around the harbour specifically in order to observe and listen to one man. This man is called Luka; as for his bunch of short stories -

The Canticles of Luka the Writer

About twenty accounts and documents of Luka's life are placed in four notebooks, all heard from people and picked up from old newspapers, too:

1. Ox drinking horn and bunches of grapes

2. String of dried blackberries
3. Pipe and thistle
4. Swords on a bearskin

The last four-part story is a breathtaking history of the ancient inhabitants of one of Esperanza's three islands, who are called the Sungalis by the other two. This collection is titled:

Chronicles of the Ravages of the Sungalis
And such is its order:

1. Headman with a hoe and an ox drinking horn
2. Peasant with a burning blackberry bush
3. Faithful servant lighting a pipe with a burning thistle
4. Fortress commander with a big sword

Having brought all this to an end, I headed off towards Holland Park, to chat with the foxes. After all, it's well known that even more foxes are gathered in London than there are stray dogs in Tbilisi. Conversing with and feeding foxes is no big thing in Holland Park. Except, and I don't know why (maybe the bad weather was the reason, or some other thing), I sat on the designated bench for a good long while, and not even one fox appeared.

It seems like it was the drizzle which disagreed with them; but I am accustomed to sitting and roaming about in the rain and it seems like the peak of physical exercise to me, for which modern doctors will condemn me, though maybe old-fashioned physicians will agree with me. So you see, when I had thoroughly soaked myself in that drizzle and fog waiting for foxes, I thought of one thing.

"If I count like a first-year pupil, along these outlines, vertical and horizontal, height-wise and width-wise, there are thirteen stories, but isn't that too much mathematics?"

I'm no good at maths, but I realised this: nine short and four long lines cross over each other, and each new notebook was established at a crossing point, but won't this book of stories just be read along straight lines? No, it doesn't matter at all, but you may think that out of these thirty-six notebooks, surely the stories organised on straight lines must not be the only ones: obviously, some other adventures will be created, too, if you choose the notebooks correctly and order them just so

So it turned out that more work materialised. That's the upside of telling stories across separate notebooks. It's not necessary to read absolutely all the notebooks consecutively from beginning to end. If anything from these tables of contents interests you, pick out the corresponding notebook, arrange the lines accordingly and read like that.

I singled out several people from these thirty-six notebooks, and came up with separate books for them:

The Life and Deeds of Khetia the Erstwhile Priest

1. Headman with a hoe and an ox drinking horn
2. Three whetstones and a basket full of blackberries
3. Four blackberry bushes
4. Woman in a bashlyk with a sword
5. Two blind spies with swords
6. Black-handled knife
7. Boat full of thistles with three oars
8. Goat with a basket full of grapes

9. Three sighted spies
10. Mule eating thistles
11. Centurion with two swords and two daggers
12. Peasant with a burning blackberry bush
13. Faithful servant lighting a pipe with a burning thistle
14. Two pairs of yoked oxen hauling bunches of grapes
15. Fortress commander with a big sword

The hero of this "life", Khetia, was no longer on the islands for me to meet, but he was remembered (and very well, too), which is why I simply picked out from the notebooks (shuffled, like cards) the necessary ones.

In the lists of four-parters, there was already a story devoted to the fetching museum chairman, and one for the queen, too, but the relationship between them demands more attention. On top of this, one old person, all powerful and really quite noticeable, appears across the notebooks. From the lives of these three illustrious people, another story collection grew legs, and was created:

The Book of the Three Old Sovereigns

Whose row of notebooks is like this:

1. Two yoked pairs of oxen hauling bunches of grapes
2. One handful of blackberries
3. Two houses festooned with bunches of grapes
4. Three whetstones and a basket full of blackberries
5. Girl with a pitcher and bunches of grapes
6. Four blackberry bushes
7. Bunch of grapes
8. Two sickles and a thistle flower
9. Basket full of blackberries and a widow
10. Two blind spies with swords
11. Centurion with two swords and two daggers
12. Lightning bolt from the sky and burning thistles
13. Young girl and boy in love in a field of thistles
14. Large boat with a cannon and sheaves of thistles
15. Faithful servant lighting a pipe with a burning thistle
16. Black-handled knife
17. Peasant with a burning blackberry bush
18. Woman in a bashlyk with a sword

Of course, this method of innovative inventories has not neglected the stories of the two lovers and their many paths. That's why the following book also turned up:

Visramiani, the Book of the Life of the Beloved

I divided this book into four equal parts and added an epilogue, too (from the same notebooks, of course). This is how the list looks:

Early

1. One handful of blackberries
2. Three whetstones and a basket full of blackberries

3. Thistle flower
4. Four blackberry bushes

Later On

5. Girl with pitcher and a bunch of grapes
6. String of dried blackberries
7. Basket full of blackberries and a widow
8. Peasant with a burning blackberry bush

Even Later On

9. Lightning bolt from the sky and burning thistles
10. Pipe and thistle
11. Two sickles and thistle flower
12. Black-handled knife

In the End

13. Swords on a bearskin
14. General's hat and five swords
15. Faithful servant lighting a pipe with a burning thistle
16. Woman in a bashlyk with a sword

In the Very End

17. Fortress commander with a big sword

Now I approached this perilous place, the strange storehouse where the composition of these innovative inventories led me. Once I had compiled these three so-called shuffled inventories, I then realised that it is possible to endlessly create new inventories of books/booklets/lives from the scope, the contents and the narratives of these thirty-six notebooks.

These thirty-six notebooks which I've cobbled together will tell you as many stories as you'd like about the Ioane Islands, otherwise known as Santa Esperanza, and about the breaking or melting of native hearts.

That's why I abandoned the writing/finding of new books. First, it seems to me that I have already gathered the best collections of stories, and second, if anybody else wanted to, the notebooks are in their hands, and they may keep up this work: in their idle hours, they can carry on and alter/adapt everything from my compiled inventories: the nine short ones, the four big ones and also the three extracted from the shuffle, just like several cards are usually drawn from the pack, one after another. As it stands, there's nothing that can be done with these thirty-six notebooks and nothing in them can be changed, but new notebooks can be added, as the mood strikes one: the Esperansian game of Inti often heats up when played with two identical packs, or seventy-two cards. So, everything is in the reader's hands, who can even become a writer, too.

That's how the story of such books goes, when you write in separate notebooks, and when, moreover, you don't understand much of anything about mathematics, or cards, for that matter.

I can wish courage to the continuer, the adapter and the supplementer of stories, with the words that Marco Polo, the most outstanding of all storytellers, expelled right before his death:

"I have not told half of what I saw."

That's also why I think that every dextrous person can cleverly add anything into this narrative, but in the case of addition, they must add four notebooks each time; or if they're too lazy for that, they should industriously fill in the last pages of the already-existing thirty-six notebooks. I'll sincerely offer my help, if and when any questions appear about Santa Esperanza, otherwise known as the Ioane Islands.

I have many friends in that land. The people are good, life is full of truth. There's the sea and the ancient citadel, and likewise the love of girls and boys is called by seven different names. There are many such things there which you will miss, and if there's anything someone needs whilst writing, I'll go down a treat as a genuine advisor in the islands' business.

By and large, it's possible to read these notebooks from beginning to end, too: follow on from the first bunch of grapes, wander first through the notebooks of the vines, from the lowest to the highest, then those of the blackberries in the same way, then those of the thistles, and last of all, those of the swords, which come to an end with the highest card, with the sword-wielding fortress commander. One other peculiarity was apparent to me: if a person intends to read these thirty-six books, it's all the same which notebook they begin with; the important thing is to cross out a notebook once it's been read, and then reach for another. They will understand the story with any structure.

I must confess one more thing. This book has another idiosyncrasy in common with a pack of cards: out of the thirty-six cards, or notebooks, it's possible to lose one, two, three, four, yet the game can still be played.

Somehow or other, I managed to fly away from London, and I reached Tbilisi. Itinerancy is a great job, but the itinerant's instincts are often strange. For example, I almost always return home earlier than promised: I'll say, "On the evening of the 28th," and in fact, I'll return on the 27th. At home, it's like they weren't expecting me, but they've remembered, too, that I see through this ruse, so they are still waiting for me. Once I've arrived, I announce:

"If you don't go anywhere, you won't miss home. It's an old adage."

My wife says, "He lays the blame on us. As if he goes away to miss us."

"It's possible to think one thing or another and have it turn out different," I conceded.

"Yes, a whole other thing," said my wife. I pulled the notebooks out of my bag again and dropped them on the table. That was that, and what about the rest to follow? It's in the notebooks. Outside of them, too, perhaps.

Aka Morchiladze

Tbilisi/Istanbul/Citadel Saint John/Trabzon/Tbilisi/London/Tbilisi

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