

Jazzmine in Bloom

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Chapter 1

Love in the Month of March

Lenin and Stalin walked into the Veliaminov diner, ordered ten *Khinkali*¹ each and two pints of beer and went over to a vacant table..... These were the Gori Drama Theatre actors wearing the great leaders' make-up and their clothes; since the early morning they were driven around the city to entertain the crowds gathered for spontaneous rallies.

The whole country was agitated; thousands went to rallies in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Tskhinvali, Sokhumi, Batumi and of course Gori. Students and schoolchildren made an absolute majority, who was joined by factory workers and a few intellectuals. Soon the marches attracted the pupils' parents, too. An amazing number of protesters were young women and girls, the most active of them all, an extremely surprising fact for a patriarchal country such as Georgia..... Wreaths were laid at the statue of the Soviet leader, poems were recited and songs were sung in his honor..... Stalin and Georgia were praised, while Khrushchev and the Russians were sworn at: 'The only mistake made by Stalin was not executing that bald Khrushchev.....'

All of this was triggered by Nikita Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Party Congress in Moscow about the cult of personality in which he denounced Stalin's purges, criticizing him and his policy. Particularly upsetting was the part where he talked about Stalin and Beria both being Georgians, which meant Georgian nationals exercised special treatment and enjoyed certain privileges during the purges, etc. The situation was further aggravated by Anastas Mikoyan's speech at the Congress, which by many was interpreted as an indirect insult to the Georgian nation.

Such speeches, and their direct or indirect hints, gave rise to anti-Georgian sentiments in Russia, while in Georgia – for the first time during the Soviet regime – they gave rise to the birth of nationalism. The father of Georgian nationalism was none other than Soso Jugashvili, while its mother was the excessive attraction of Georgians to beauty..... Indeed, poems and songs prevailed during the street rallies..... In the beginning of March, it was an actor, a tall man with a slightly muddled mind, Spartak Baghashvili, who laid the first wreath at the Stalin monument in Tbilisi.....

But still, political slogans were voiced too, marked with poetic irrationality, though: 'Long live the Party line and its continuation!', 'The Kremlin starlight shone over Gori Castle and, warmed by the people's hearts, rose like the sun.....'

Along with poems and songs, other passionate addresses were heard in those days: 'Let's send a telegram to the United Nations!', 'A telegram to comrade Mao Zedong!', 'Comrade Mao Zedong has

¹Traditional Georgian dumplings with a meat stuffing.

opposed Khrushchev for his criticism of Stalin and for revisiting the Party line!' At the time, Marshal Zhu De, the Chinese military minister, one of the main contributors to the Chinese Communist Revolution, was visiting Tbilisi. At one of the rallies someone came up with the idea of a delegation to negotiate with Marshal Zhu De: Comrade Mao and Marshal Zhu De, loyal to Stalin's line and to Georgia!

The demands became dangerously extreme: 'A constitutional way must be found to ensure that Georgia secedes the Soviet Union!'

Students blocked the road, not allowing Vasil Mzhavanadze, First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, to drive into the city centre. He was coming from Tskhneti, the hilly suburb with the governmental villas, but was forced to step out of the car and shout 'Great Stalin!', 'Long live Georgia!' and then he was taken to a rally at the first building of the University. He was allowed to leave only after he had addressed the crowd.....

'Down with Stalin's critics! Georgia can take perfect care of its son if the Russians leave us be! Mikoyan's slander hovers over us like a cloud of black smoke! Khrushchev made a grave mistake!' – were the most common statements heard at the rally in front of the Government House.

People seemed to be on their own – there was no sight of militia or any other official law enforcement forces. However, the KGB must have been somewhere; its officers and agents mingling with the crowd, listening in, watching from the corner of the eye..... By the same nationalist token, inspired by ethnic pride, the Georgian KGB must have sided with the protesters, at least secretly..... They say even Alexi Inauri, KGB head at the time, demonstrated a soft-hearted approach towards the detained; some were just reproached and chided, others were soon released.....

No doubt, the situation was controlled by the state. The overall monitoring was the responsibility of someone sent from Moscow for this purpose, a deputy head of an administrative department of the Central Committee, from only a glance a mere clerk. The Georgian Party leaders looked him in the eyes, catching his every word as if they were naughty schoolchildren expecting a well-deserved punishment. Extraordinary defense measures were taken to protect the buildings of the Government House, Central Committee and Central Post Office. The Soviet Army was mobilised around the city – on the orders of General Fedyuninsky and his immediate superior Marshal Zhukov.

However, none of these hit the eye; Tbilisi, Gori and other cities were left to the protesters to roam. And the weird things the people in the streets thought of: The actors impersonating Lenin and Stalin were brought forth on the makeshift stage and the crowd demanded that Lenin kissed Stalin, then that Stalin should kiss Lenin, and they did..... 'Hurray!' came from the protesters in which young people made the majority and if there were adults and elderly, they felt like children!

Apart from a handful of people who had bad premonitions, especially after some destroyers had flown over the city several times, no one felt that the great Stalin would send his bloody kiss to his home country from his grave. No one believed the machine of his creation would start shooting.

It started on Rustaveli Avenue, near the Post Office when, in a jostle to get inside, probably with the naive idea of occupying it, a young man hit a Soviet soldier on the eye with a flag handle. But it happened in the evening, during dusk.....

Earlier, before the well-known gory events, in the Veliaminov diner, by the public demand, Lenin and Stalin hugged and kissed each other with lips smeared in *Khinkali* juice.

'Fuck Khrushchev and those who don't like Stalin!' one of the customers shouted and others agreed.

'With this small glass filled with huge emotions, I'd like to drink to what Stalin said when he refused to swap his own son Yasha for the German General Paulus. He was ready to sacrifice his flesh and blood for his beloved country: "I don't exchange a soldier for a field marshal," he said. Let's drink to our Soso, great Stalin, to small Gori, his cradle, and to great Georgia!' The customers shouted in unison raising their glasses of vodka.

'What if I drink to Nat King Cole?' a young man asked his companion and winked at him.

'What if we get beaten up for it?' the other stopped him.

These were the infamous *Stilyagas*. They cared for Lenin, Stalin and Khrushchev as much as a Chinese peasant did for the past conditional of the Georgian verb. They loved jazz, films like George from Dinky-Jazz, girls like Deanna Durbin, and the American way of life in general. They loved joking about the USSR, had plenty of cynicism and arrogance. They sported baggy jackets, tapering trousers, narrow gaudy ties, black patent leather and red suede shoes, and bushy hairdo, right in the middle of their heads. The *Stilyagi* fashion came from Moscow where its heydays were the late 1940s to mid-1950s. Their breeding ground was the Georgian Technical University whose head, Rapo Dvali, even managed to get permission for the students to organize their own jazz orchestra, as well as a jazz quartet.

'Make way! *Khinkali*'s coming! Long live great Stalin! Long live Georgia!'

More vodka was drunk..... One of the customers used the long fingernail of his little finger to put some pepper on the steaming *Khinkali*. He had another long nail on his ring finger – for salt of course.

'Who do you love more, *Khinkali* or Erroll Garner?' one *Stilyaga* asked the other.

'Brandy,' was the reply.

At the table next to the *Stilyagas*, there stood a modestly dressed middle-aged man with greying hair. He was eating his kebab using a knife and a fork. It was Zakaria Karmeli, or Shakro.

Zakaria, or Shakro Karmeli, was a man of distinguished past. In 1926, after an unfortunate disagreement in a restaurant with Yakov Blumkin, an agent of the Bolshevik Secret Service, he was sent to the Solovki prison camp. At the time the camp was run by Gleb Bokii, who turned the old Russian monastery complex into a sadistic penitentiary institution. Above all, he was in charge of the secret service section of the OGPU, specialising on cryptography, wiretapping and radio surveillance, mechanisms of neuropsychological impact and, more importantly, the organiser of expeditions to find Hyperborea and *Shambhala*. When Karmeli discovered Bokii's interest, he decided to befriend him, but it was the latter who made the first step. Bokii made him an agent of his secret service, probably impressed by Karmeli's irrational theory of the Svaneti anomaly and his obvious curiosity about *Shambhala*.

Two years later, Karmeli was released from the Solovki camp and Bokii immediately attached him to Alexander Barchenko, an amazing person, deeply fascinated with the *Shambhala* idea, the initiator of expeditions to Lapland where he sought Hyperborean, the cradle of the Indo-Arian civilization. For

some time Karmeli accompanied Barchenkoon his trips to the remote regions of Russia, but then returned to Georgia and settled in Gudauta. There he met Astromov-Kirichenko, Master of the Russian esoteric masonry, known as the Martinist Order. Incidentally, he also was an agent of the secret service headed by Bokoi. When Lavrentiy Beria was appointed head of the OGPU, he replaced all former staff supposedly loyal to Nikolai Yezhov with his own people. In 1937, Bokoi's entire department was arrested, Bokoi and Barchenko were executed on Stalin's orders. The political purges didn't spare anyone, Polisadov, Belustin and Astromov-Kirichenko, while everyone connected with them was put on trial, later referred to as the Mrakobesy case, and exiled to Siberia in 1940. Karmeli's old acquaintance Nadia Vorontsova-Dachkova, an extremely beautiful woman who worked for Blumkin, was also tried and then sent to a labour camp, in fact leaving her to the criminal prisoners to be used as they pleased.... Shakro Karmeli managed to escape the tribulations. He moved from Abkhazia to Svaneti, where he dodged conscription during WW2. There he met famous mountaineer Aliosha Japaridze, even accompanied him on the Khvamli Mount expedition in 1945. However, they returned empty-handed and very soon Aloisha Japaridze died under suspicious circumstances while climbing Mount Ushba.

After that Zakaria Karmeli returned to Tbilisi, to never leave it; he lived with his interest in the occult and his memories. He befriended several people whom he invited to his place once a week on Saturdays to discuss esoteric matters. The rest of the week he usually spent in the public library, reading a lot and taking meticulous notes in his thick notepad. He would take breaks to smoke, for which he used to go the smoking area near the toilets, the favourite place for the queer chaps, who would smoke and talk leisurely... In his later years, Zakaria Karmeli grew into an aesthetic-occultist decadent, complete with a bisexual attraction, driven by girls as well as young men. Some of them he would invite to his home, intoxicate them with his talk, tell them exotic stories – some true, some invented, treat them to a glass or two of strong drink, show them some lewd pictures.... The old man fell in love with a twenty-year old girl, Miranda, daughter of the Avalovs, the former nobility of historic Tbilisi. In terms of sexual potency Karmeli had nothing to boast about, but he would imagine having oral sex with the girl, an act he called rose-and-nightingale, because he was like a mutrib-minstrel, singing his love song like a nightingale to an open rose... Yes, as he got older, Zakaria became what we call today a pervert, but his perversion wasn't that much pathology – rather a conscious political stance; negation and non-acceptance of the Communists and the country they had built. In short, he suffered from being Oscar Wilde in the middle of the Soviet Union!

Someone brought the news to the Veliaminov diner: The group formed to negotiate with comrade Zhu De wished to talk to comrade Zhu De! They found out that comrade Zhu De was staying in the *Intourist Hotel*, where the delegation headed to, shouting 'Zhu De! Zhu De!' Marshal Zhu De stepped onto the balcony of his third floor suite and saluted the crowd. The protestors cried out in honour of comrade Mao Zedong: 'Stalin! Mao! Stalin! Mao!' There and then it was decided to prepare a telegram saying the following: 'Request comrade Molotov to temporarily act as the head of the Soviet government. Comrades Nikita Khrushchev, Mikhail Suslov and Anastas Mikoyan should be put on

trial. The present decision is to be sent to the governments of all Soviet republics as well as the governments of the Western world, U.S. President Eisenhower among them!

'Wow! They're sending it to the president of the United States! Super-duper!' one of the *Stilyagas* said.

'They might as well send one to Louis Armstrong,' the other said.

Zakaria Karmeli overheard their exchange and turned to them:

'I apologize, young men, for interfering. If I heard correctly, you've just mentioned Louis Armstrong, haven't you?'

The first *Stilyaga* put down the jug with vodka and looked at Karmeli with astonishment:

'Do you like jazz?'

'Guess you're listening to Utyosov, right? But that's not real jazz,' the other added.

Karmeli smiled:

'I don't listen to either Utyosov or Tsfasman, though the latter seems extremely talented. I listen to genuine jazz: Sidney Bechet, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Glenn Miller.....'

The *Stilyagas'* eyes rounded in disbelief:

'How come you know about them?'

'A person of your age listening to jazz? Those are real American jazz musicians, the ones you've just named. How long have you known them?'

'About thirty years.'

'How's that?'

'Once I accompanied some Americans to Svaneti and they let me listen to real jazz,' Karmeli smiled.

'Americans? In Svaneti? Are you trying to make fun of us?'

'Are you by any chance working for the KGB?' the second *Stilyaga* felt uncomfortable. 'Otherwise who'd allow you to go near Americans?'

'It's a long story,' Karmeli said. 'In those days Americans weren't feared. Quite the opposite, they were invited to come and invest in the local industry.'

'Sounds as if it was a great time!'

'I'd never dream of coming across a man your age who's fond of jazz, and in Velyaminov's place at that! What's your name, man?'

'Zakaria Karmeli.'

'Douglas.'

'And I'm Jimmy.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Karmeli smiled at the young men.

'And how do you listen to jazz now? Have you got a gramophone and vinyl discs?' Douglas asked.

'I do have a gramophone but I mainly listen to the radio.'

'What? The radio? Our regular radios play Tsfasman's *Rendezvous*, at best.'

'It's an American one, from the War, even looks like a canon shell. It's good at short waves. Bought it from an Armenian.'

'Sound great,' Jimmy said.

'Would you like to come to my place? We can listen to music and have some excellent brandy,' Karmeli suggested.

'Oh, thanks, but no. We need to see Niaz, he's waiting for us. Please don't take it personal,' Douglas declined the invitation. He was still convinced the jazz man was a KGB agent.

Jimmy loved jazz and brandy so much that he told his friend:

'Douglas, you go to Niaz' place and I'll come later, okay?' Then he turned to Karmeli with a smile: 'Let's go, jazz it!'

In order to get to Karmeli's house they had to go over Marx Bridge. The entire area teemed with people because Stalin's statue was in the green square. It was covered in flowers and wreaths. Overseen by young *Komsomol* girls, pioneers were standing guard at the monument. Karmeli slowed down at the stage, then paused to watch the protesters; young girls whose feminine shapes struggled to show underneath their pathetically colourless, nondescript, threadbare coats. Their faces: some pale, others flushed; a bit of soft, downy hair above the upper lips, acne skin, unknown to make-up..... Stalin, motherland, revolt, march, rumble and slogans, bright eyes – a murky stream of emotions and impressions had, if there was such a thing, swept away everything feminine in them..... They might have felt an amorous stare, but would immediately tuck a loose curl behind the ear and join the crowd in excitement: 'Long live the leader! Long live Georgia! Hurray!'

'Strange,' Karmeli thought, 'it's not only these *Komsomol* girls. Even Grigol Robakidze in exile and Denikin himself used to praise Stalin, believing he was a titan, the greatest genius of all times.....'

Everything revolved around Stalin's exalted image: the sapphire skies and emerald land of classic poetry, the full moon over Mount Mtatsminda, Ilia Chavchavadze's great shadow, holly visage of greying Akaki Tsereteli, young Baratashvili's grave, fields and valleys, deer roaming the lofty mountains, Beria, Yegorov and Kantaria, Molotov and Voroshilov.....

Stilyaga Jimmy and Zakaria Karmeli passed through the rallying crowds, walked over the bridge and went into one of the buildings on Plekhanov Avenue.

'This way, Jimmy. I live here. Welcome to my digs.'

They climbed the once pretty *Art Nouveau* staircase, passing the once beautiful *Art Nouveau* paintings on the entrance walls.

'Here we are,' Karmeli pulled out the keys from his pocket and opened the door to his flat.

Jimmy looked around: an exquisitely inlaid sideboard, an old, stylish sofa of worn leather and with broken springs, a round table, chairs, a large multi-coloured lamp with a mosaic shade and a huge grasshopper with ruby eyes perched on it, two deep armchairs in the corner with a cylinder-shaped radio between them!

'Stalin might have been the greatest of Georgia's sons, but we should never forget Eniseli, the greatest of all beverages, His Majesty, the brandy!' Karmeli said taking a bottle from the sideboard.

'I'm afraid we are more used to a cheaper three-star brandy, Uncle Zakaria. It's cheaper and the effect is quite fast.'

'Sawdust is used to produce the cheap ones, while Eniseli is kept in oak barrels till they are ready,' Karmeli was pouring the brandy into small tumblers. 'Let's drink to our meeting today, Jimmy!'

They drained their glasses. Eniseli – velvety and fiery at the same time, the king among the Soviet brandies, way above others of its time, the faceless 1950s, truly superior to others. Just like Stalin

stood above his Politburo members, who trembled with fear, or like a Brahman looks down on beggars.....Eniseli!

Karmeli went over to the radio and switched it on: the light came on, the loudspeakers hissed and crackled and then music sounded: Istanbul – Constantinople.....

'Wow, Istanbul!' Jimmy exclaimed, jumped to his feet and walked around in the rhythm of the song.

'Yes, Istanbul, the Sea of Marmara, Hagia Sophia, Sultan Ahmed Mosque..... Such beauty,' Karmeli murmured.

'Am I stuck with the frigging USSR forever?' Jimmy said. 'Wish I could see Istanbul at least. Damn it, if only I lived in the US, I could screw girls, and what girls at that! What do the Russians want? Why have they locked us up? Why can't they let us be?'

'Have some more brandy, Jimmy,' Karmeli told him and tuned to another station. A swing big band poured out of the radio: the jazz of men and women, genuine jazz.....

'That's an ace of spades.'

Jimmy sank into the armchair, buried his head in his hands and froze.....

Karmeli poured more brandy, handed Jimmy his glass and sat on the sofa. He was watching Jimmy very closely. When the piece finished, the young *Stilyaga* moaned:

'That was super-duper! God bless the country where such music is played!'

'Yes, I suspect they don't play like that in our country and never will,' Karmeli agreed.

'You do dig jazz, don't you, Uncle Zakaria?' Jimmy asked, earnestly.

'How do I put it, dear Jimmy..... I believe there are other things I like more than jazz,' Karmeli replied.

'Such as?'

'I'd rather not talk about them now, maybe some other time,' Karmeli said and added with a smile,

'But what makes your heart beat? Have you been a *Stilyaga* for long?'

'A couple of years,' Jimmy smiled, too, a little embarrassed, though.

'I like young people who care for their individual style,' Karmeli noted. 'Besides, you belong to those advanced who appreciate jazz.'

'You might say that. What else is there for us to do in the USSR?' Jimmy muttered, the brandy talking in him. He listened to the music, then raised his glass and recited, '*My girl has a high waist, beautiful lips and big breasts. She's got beauty and she's mine.*'

'Do you write poetry, Jimmy?' Karmeli sounded surprised.

'No, it's GuramRcheulishvili's poem.'

'But you like poetry, don't you?' Karmeli asked.

'I like women, jazz and brandy!' the *Stilyaga* uttered in a solemn drunken voice.

'We've got brandy and jazz, but I can't say the same about women,' Karmeli winked at Jimmy and hummed a tune to himself. He leaned back, rolled his eyes, feeling he was getting in the mood for a game. He was in the mood and he turned to Jimmy:

'I'm a *Bodhisattva*, Jimmy, a *Bodhisattva*! But the wrong one – I'm not here to help people through the *Samsara*. I'm waiting for someone to help me, bring me back to this life.....*Avalokiteshvara, Samantabhadra*..... Do you know who *Bodhisattva* is, Jimmy?'

Jimmy glanced at him from the armchair. He was drunk, but Karmeli's delirious speech tensed him immediately. He got to his feet, put down his glass and said:

'I've got to go. Niaz and the boys are waiting for me. Thanks for the excellent jazz and brandy.'

Karmeli rose, too, approached Jimmy and put his hand on his hip..... The *Stilyaga* felt a bolt of lightning go through his body.

'Oh, no, make no mistake! I'm not that kind!' And then suddenly he burst out, 'Screw you, you faggot!' His fist hit the elderly man in his face. Karmeli was hurled to the sofa. On his way out Jimmy overturned the chairs. He dashed out of the flat.....

For some time Karmeli was unconscious, then he came around.

'You are listening to the *Voice of America*, singing on.....' a deep baritone sounded, followed by the so familiar Yankee Doodle.....

It was dark outside. The sound of shooting reached him from a distance.....