

The Naked King

BY RATI RATIANI

Synopsis

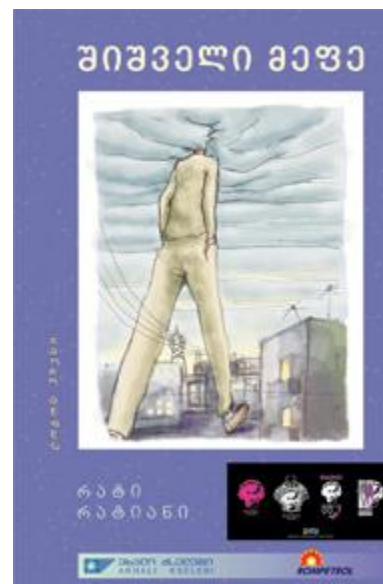
One of the most promising debutants in contemporary Georgian prose, Rati Ratiani chose 7 out of her numerous short stories to present in her first publication *The Naked King*. The young author reveals maturity far beyond her age both in the content and form of its delivery in her short prose. The world in her stories is mainly urban, its heroes are casual people as well though Ratiani manages to cast a totally different light on them, rediscover their everyday lives. Their vain search for something meaningful that makes life worth living transcends them into symbols, generalized images of lower-middle class youth in Georgia. Ratiani somehow manages to write about political processes and at the same time keep a long distance from being called a political author. We see the reality through their personal histories, in very isolated and introverted world the characters keep trying to maintain their private spaces as secluded as possible. Their transcendental loneliness does not allow them to be a part of what is going on around them.

Rati Ratiani's prose is witty and intelligent, her way of storytelling turns relatively simple plotlines into readable and even exciting fiction. Her merits are doubled by the fact that she as a debutant is one of the rare exceptions in contemporary Georgian prose who managed to find her own, unique style of narration; distinguished and easily identifiable.

Extracts

*From the story **Death in Noah's Arc***

A permanent revolution. That was the thing. A new revolution ripened every five years. Every new government soon broke up into tiny particles, atoms, nuclei – with conflicting ambitions, wishes and ideas on running the country. Then, the most frustrated left the bulk of the particles, forming the opposition. As a result, another revolution with rallies and banners. And more often than not, rather dangerous. Frankly speaking, the most boring part of



these revolutions was public speeches. Passionate leaflets collected dust on the shelves, only remembered every couple of years. And, musical performances. The state is a state, but performances are people's bread. In truth, for many years now, people have been watching a political farce on their TVs.

Securely locked in *Noah's Arc* for many years, I used to sense the onslaught of yet another revolution by the change of the authorities. Taking from the rich and giving to the poor, then taking from the newly prosperous poor and giving to the impoverished rich. Had Noah postponed his cruise to the other world for a couple of years, I wouldn't have been stranded in the Arc, covering my groin like a footballer in the penalty area. I couldn't figure it out why the army of unsatisfied women chose me as the leader after the legendary patriarch's death and why they dragged me to the firing line. In simpler words, one or another female used to make a violently jealous scene every other day to me, the dying homosexual, or some would yank me into the toilet, trying to get their daily portion of sperm for their faces. Pinching my bottom, pulling my hairs and making indecent offers don't even count. Old sly Noah! The dentist was right: Noah the flower! His soul hovered above the Arc like an artificial penis. And not only that.

Women always liked me, some even loved madly. Apparently, it was some evil joke or an irony on the part of Fate. Years back, I had an affair with one – I was 17 or 18, while she was in her late twenties. She was strong-minded and full of principles, too many for my liking. In those days I surely preferred to roam the city streets in search of adventure. I was light as a feather, allowing the wind to take me wherever it chose to blow. It was great in bed, but hell out of it. She was beside herself with jealousy, even tried to commit suicide. She survived – slashed her veins in a hospital yard. We split when she recovered. And that ended my experience of a long relationship with the female gender. It did demonstrate the full beauty of a man-woman sex, but left me with a long-lasting dread of the stronger sex.

If I knew anything about reincarnation, I'd say the silver spoon fell into a dung heap for reincarnating me in such an inappropriate vessel.

Now I'd like to tell you about the day of my death and the Flood. A team of ex-footballers had been running the Arc for five years, the depts had been mounting and the revolution was ripening.

As 11 September neared, my mood spoiled visibly. Not that I couldn't stand the date, but more because as time went by, I found it increasingly hard

to bear it. In the same way, I don't observe New Year's Day, Christmas and Easter, other religious and family celebrations – I just don't remember them. Apparently, I'm becoming vicious. The city turning into a nest of rabid ants always adversely affected me. Laden family heads, sweaty housewives at cookers, throat-slitted piglets and chicken, mountains of food on the tables, enough for the whole year but destined to go down the drain and block it in a day or two, all TV channels giving advice on how to pacify our gall bladder rebellious after all the fatty and spicy yummies. The best celebration might be if the tables were laid outside, in the streets. Just imagine: everyone brings out whatever they've sweated over the day before, sets it on the tables, not forgetting to fetch tissues, plastic cups and plates. Then some wretched guy comes along, neatly picks the choicest piece of roast pork, pours himself a plastic cup of white home-made wine or cherry brandy, and says when he's finished:

'May we enjoy your cooking for another hundred years, Madam!' And then moves away to another table to try someone else's salad.

If he asks to take some with him in a small package 'for his sick dad' or 'younger siblings', it's not a problem as your gall bladder won't remind you of itself. And then, with clear conscience and healthy innards, it's time to light candles to the Blessed Virgin, asking her to protect your loved ones.

I definitely prefer a sound revolution to any family celebration.

*From the story **Bravo Pur Le Clown***

It is a warm, tranquil, transparent, deceptive autumn day when one thinks the winter has stepped back for at least a month and a half. Passers-by are unusually peaceful, as if they have shoved their everyday problems into some dark corners and are able to smile as a result. Just a smile instead of hysterical gestures, which substitute laughter and happiness as a rule. On days like this, people seem to get rid of the murky film covering their eyes and see everything clearly. Even the asphalt doesn't look perilous like a precipice – one can walk without undue fear.

Young N. has been working in the Standard Bank for three years now. He is wearing a red tie, gladly demonstrating it during his breaks when he steps out into the street. These ties are worn only by the Standard Bank employees, but in order to avoid any potential misunderstanding, he also

wears a badge with the bank logo. It means that unlike many others, he hasn't been made redundant due to the financial crisis, that he has nothing in common with the army of the unemployed rambling along the pavement and that he has a high salary and a cozy flat. True, his credit is occasionally overdrawn, but it's not a huge problem. And the fact that he doesn't have a beauty for a wife and blue-eyed son yet, doesn't make him imperfect at all.

So, N. is returning from his break. A petite young woman is walking fast in front of him. She is wearing a checkered coat and a green beret. Her hair is hidden – might be fluffy auburn, straight long brown or even blond. What if she's got a somewhat strange shoulder-bag – these days girls love things their grannies used to wear. The heels of her brown shoes are quite worn, but that's all right. There are plenty of beautiful girls in the world preferring a modest style in clothes but standing out for their individuality. Frankly speaking, he surely favoured these types over those haughty beauties overdressing in posh boutiques. The girl is heading towards his bank to pay her phone bill, probably, or get her stipend – her kinds always study hard. N. overtakes her, hastening to open the door for her.

'Please, Miss.' The door opens noiselessly, lazily turning on the hinges. N. stares at a pair of horn-rimmed glasses and hands sprinkled with age pigment spots.

They are going to remember the story for a long time in the Bank and pester N. with harmless jokes. On his part, N. will be forever haunted by dread for young women. From now on he is going to overtake any female in tight jeans and on 3-inch heels and have a good look at them in order to check with his own eyes.

It really wasn't the red-tie bank clerk's fault that a young, handsome young man worked part-time as a choir leader in an old people's home. And that all grannies, without exception, took fancy of him, but one in particular. Just two blocks away from the Bank, on the third floor of an old house, in the sitting-room, a good century older and creakier than her, this elderly lady sat until midnight looking through the photographs of her young days. In the morning she took pains to dress up for the rehearsal in the concert hall. She didn't pay much attention to the mad, hostile world around her, actually thought it quite harmless. She even tore a phone number off the advertisement glued to a lamp-post, inviting people of all ages to learn national and ball dances. Driven by her battle spirit, she only wished to outdo her rivals.

What business took her to the bank? Once a month she used to collect her pension there, nothing else.

Why the hurry? The forecast for tomorrow is wind and rain, but today it is a warm, tranquil, transparent, deceptive autumn day when one thinks the winter has stepped back for at least a month and a half. Instead of ordinary passers-by, I seem to be looking into the faces of the loved ones. They walk past me, disappear behind me, but I don't look back at them. I don't overtake them. I just walk on as my credit is up. So, listen.