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Hideout

‘Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seatbelts. Our Boeing is completing its flight from Munich to Tbilisi. In about 25 minutes we will be landing at Tbilisi International airport, where the temperature is 20 degrees Celsius. Our captain and the team wish you all the best and a pleasant evening.’

I straighten the seat. I can see the city through the window. A ripple goes through my body as we land. I like that feeling, reminding me of a newly-found love. Not really love yet, but something fresh, a feeling full of interest and hope – a moment frozen till complete immersion into love.

I’ve got all possible scenarios neatly arranged in my head, how I’m going to leave the airport and the rest of it. I’m landing in the city I saw only briefly 18 years ago. Destroyed, dark and hungry. Now it’s brightly illuminated. The modern terminal built by the new president greets the arrivals quite pompously. Hard to believe it’s the ‘sea-less’ city, the capital of my tiny home country. Am I back? Or is it my first time? I’m a visitor here too.

I’ve got little luggage. Not staying for long anyway. I’ve got two important things to take care of – one business related, the other private, and then I’m going back. To the German ‘sea-less’ city that has become a kind of home but where I still feel a visitor after 18 years of living there. It’s the first time in my life when I have enough money and knowledge to get anything I might need.

A whole army of taxi drivers blocks my way out of the terminal. They ask me in Russian if I need a taxi. I dart a look trying to spot Gu beyond the crowd. Suddenly I see him. There he is – tall, thin, kind Gu, with big beautiful eyes. I pull my bag as fast as I can.

‘Gu, I’m here!’ I raise my hand.

He moves towards me. His face bright, a little confused and unsteady, trying to push taxi drivers and passengers. He smiles and his face muscles twitch a bit.

And we stand facing each other, Gu and me. It’s the same Gu I used to cling to, grip his neck, Gu who taught me to swim in the waves and then we would scare sea gulls along the beach, Gu who used to tell interesting stories. The same Gu who hugged Misho to his chest, drive us to Sokhumi in his red car. And was madly in love with Mum. My Gu has aged in these 18 years. His hair has grey streaks and there are wrinkles around his eyes. His hands are calloused. The ‘sea-less’ city has left his face skin dry. Time has taken its toll. Time has won. Time and our story. Missing magnolias and sea gulls, living in the homeland without the homeland.

I don’t know what to do. Shall I hug him as before or shake his hand in a European manner? I’m lost for words. I want to shout, tell him how I love him, but nothing escapes my

throat, no words come out. And all the while, he stands there, frozen, stooping a little, confused and lost.

‘You’re a real lady, Aniko,’ he finally manages. ‘A real foreign lady, exactly like those I drive around when they come on business meetings.’

We put the luggage in the boot and I jump beside him. The car is decorated with flyers and stickers and I notice the taxi sign on the back seat.

‘Are you a taxi driver, Gu?’

‘Yes, Aniko, for now. I worked on a construction site but my kidney stopped me. I can’t lift heavy things anymore.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me any of this on the phone?’

‘What sort of topic is that for a conversation? To Sololaki, right?’

‘I believe so. It must be a small hotel.’

‘I know where it is and will get you there, my lady,’ he smiles.

‘Do you still live in the same place?’

‘Just upgraded it a little – put lino on the floor, plastered and painted the walls. It’s a nice room, enough for me. No one else, so enough for a single man. More importantly, I got rid of bedbugs and other pests. I’ve won a thousand-year war against them.’

‘Were you given the compensation?’

‘Not yet. Still demanding some documents. It’s so hard to be a refugee for so many years in your own country and hard to prove you’re one.’

‘Are there others from our town in that hall of residence?’

‘Remember Tsisana?’

I do remember her. Earlier I thought she was very old. I’m surprised she’s alive.

‘I help Tsisana with fixing things. For a time she went to Greece, as a carer. But then something went wrong and she came back. Now she’s a helper in a family. She’ll be happy to see you.’

‘I’ll surely drop by, but first I need to tend to my business.’

‘How did you leave Misho?’

‘Oh, Misho is my worry, Gu, since he married that woman.’

‘Yes, I remember you told me she’s much older than he, right?’

‘Much older, cold and gruff. She’s completely enslaved him.’

Poor Misho. He’s always been submissive. Never contradicted anyone, easy to manipulate. That’s why she twisted him around her little finger. And why not? Tall, attractive, young Misho.

‘Which city do they live now?’

‘The same, in the woman’s place. He works in the post office, gave up his education though. Has a good salary, and I also help from time to time.’

Misho always was too reliant and weak, glued to me. Not surprising that he broke. It’s more amazing that I didn’t. Probably because of him. I had no right to break down, while he had. He was much younger than me and had me for support. Apparently, he missed having a mother and finally found her in a much older woman. She takes care of him, sometimes

scolds him and sulks, but she is reliable. Will never abandon him, will always wait for him wherever he goes or whenever he returns. Where can she find another Misho? Thoughtful, warm, sweet and good-looking Misho. He surely feels this, that's why he is with her. Most likely he isn't aware what makes him cling to the woman 16 years his senior, but he feels secure. He's not anxious anymore. On the other hand, she doesn't expect any special responsibility or heroic deeds from him.

Returning to your home country as a visitor is a strange feeling. No one waits for me here. I don't even know where Sololaki is. I watch the brightly-lit spring Tbilisi from the car window. Holding hands, couples stroll along the wide main street. We drive up a cobbled street and it's clear Gu's car is having a problem climbing the steep slope. We pass several narrow bends and stop at a three-storey building.

'Will you come in?'

'Not the right time, Aniko,' he replies. 'You're tired now, but I'll pick you up tomorrow morning and take you wherever you wish. Then I'd like to treat you to a good dinner, in Mtskheta.'

'But it'll be on me!'

'I can afford to take my red-head Aniko to Mtskheta. Please don't deny me that pleasure.'

We stay together for some time. The aroma of blossoming lilacs fills the air. I'm waiting for him to ask about Mum, but he seems to hesitate. I'm sure he can't wait to ask, but refrains himself. We talk about practically everything except the main thing. How many questions I still want to ask, how many stories I'd like to hear about the past. How many times I wanted to shout into the phone: Why didn't you marry Mum? Why did you let us go without you? Why didn't you become our dad, Gu? We might have been happier. I might have been hopeful. Mum might not have hidden under the white quilt, leaving Misho and me alone on this hard road of life. Why? I seem to have an answer to all these questions. I know why, but I want to hear his side. I want to hear it from him.

'All right, good night. Sleep tight,' he bids goodbye.

He starts the engine. I watch his sign-less car making a U-turn on the narrow street. But all the while I inwardly see the red car in which Mum, Misho and I were hiding in the boot. My pockets full of jewellery, Misho snuggling to Mum. The red car races, taking us away. Young Gu is driving with the sun tan of the seaside town on his face.

The hotel room is comfortable. I unpack my things but am too lazy to put them away into the drawers. I'm tired and hungry. I'd like some khachapuri, a real one, with Imereti cheese, not with mozzarella.

I pull out all the materials I'll need tomorrow, turn on my notebook, get on the bed and look at the materials.

It's a pleasant feeling when you are invited as a foreign expert to evaluate the mental health programme. It means I haven't suffered for nothing. Sleepless nights and the time I spent learning weren't wasted. Eventually, I became one of the best professionals. But who

knows what goes on inside, deep down in me. And it's not necessary. The main thing is I do my job, put programmes together, while my traumas are nobody's business.

I'm sure the presentation will be fine. The representatives of the centre have been in contact for a whole year and finally got my consent. The team is ready to accept my ideas and recommendations. I'm not nervous. The only thing I want is to meet Alé. When I get into the hall, or in the hallway.

He left my calls and messages unanswered. God knows how many messages he deleted even without reading them. But he will be obliged to listen to me. Definitely. I'll find him. Find him in this city. I'll look straight into his eyes and bombard him with all those questions that torture me for so long. My mouth is bitter, my body aches. I remember his face, features, wrinkles around his eyes and two opposing emotions choke me – disgust and passion, disappointment and the desire to feel his body, blend with him, drown in his smell and breathing. Cowardly, gutless Alé – have I proved to be stronger than him?

I hear my crazy heartbeat in my ears. Feels like the heart beating in there... How did it get there? Or how can it beat so loudly? Recently it has happened several times. My hands are sweaty as if drenched in water, and my toes are frozen at these times. I don't feel my little toes in particular. I try to move them, step down with all my strength on the floor or ground, depending where I am. Now I'm walking along a wide avenue, waiting for the green light at the crossing.

I squeeze my brother's hand. He winces from pain but doesn't utter a sound. Apparently, he also needs to know he's not alone. And I squeeze harder to be less scared of crossing the street. The crossing is long, with more streets and bends ahead. I don't remember how many million people live in the city. Should have listened more attentively when Gu was telling about it. But I was busy with something else at the time. Now I'm interested. I wonder how many millions there are including us... I'm not sure... I don't know many other things, neither that one day we'll stop holding hands, many red lights will face us on the crossings, I'll feel my heartbeat in my ears and bitter taste in my mouth. My toes will freeze many times more and I might not be able to put my feet on the ground. Hard times seem to be left behind, everything unpleasant and painful, only that crossing is left... I know what I've been through, but as for what lies ahead I'm not sure – it's all too vague, so I try not to dwell on it.

At the moment my only concern is to leave the four-year old boy in the kindergarten. Then I'll have to cross many streets to get to my school that I hate, quite intensely. Every night I pray for it to blow up, or vanish. Every night I pray to return home that is, I believe, four thousand kilometers away from this country and this city. I don't remember exactly how far it is, though Gu told me but I forgot. I know it's very far. One needs to fly there. It was our first flight. When we took off, I felt tickling in my stomach, the same kind of

sensation I had on the swings. I enjoyed it. My brother and I even laughed out loud. Mum tried to stop us. She was crying, as well as some others on the plane. I think they cried because of Sokhumi. I don't understand how a city can fall. I failed to imagine it though I tried hard. Then I was hungry and Mum told me had it been normal times, they'd serve some food. I wondered what it would feel to eat on the plane, what the food would be like, and what 'normal times' were. I closed my eyes tightly and imagined Mum's fried potatoes with sour sauce, fried chicken leg, crunching between my teeth. My brother and I used to fight for those legs. On the whole, the flight was all right though they didn't allow me to sit at the window. I wanted to see the clouds.

Eventually, the green light is on and we cross the street. We walk very slowly, but then I quicken my pace, more and more. Misho finds it hard to keep up with me. His steps are short. He's rather small, with golden locks, his head sitting funnily on his thin neck. His deep green eyes squint in the bright sunshine. I'm afraid we won't be able to cross on time. I'm scared of the traffic. There are so many cars in this city, mainly Mercedes and Volkswagens. They drive very fast but don't break the rules. But better safe than sorry. What if I'm hit? Who'll tell Mum? Who'll take Misho home? Who'll wait for Gu to call in the evening?

I wish the day to end. I want to get back home which isn't home yet. It's a flat we've been living in for the past three months, but still it's not home. How could it? It doesn't even smell like home.

I miss Mum. The faster I go, the quicker my heart beats, the drier my mouth gets and I miss Mum even more. Yes, I want Mum. We left her in bed. Left without her saying goodbye. Just called out not to lock the door and covered her head with the quilt.

Mum mustn't be lying all the time. She must hold my brother's and my hands. But Mum is in bed, hiding under the quilt. I don't understand what's going on. I feel guilty but don't know why. I try to remember what wrong I've done. Could I have done something that caused this? Since we moved to this city, she's been out only twice. She stays in. In the beginning I thought she was a bit depressed. Didn't play with us, didn't read to us, didn't take us for walks. Little by little she stopped eating with us and one day just didn't get up at all. Didn't dress or comb her hair. She just stayed in bed, closed her eyes and covered her head with the quilt. At the time I thought she was tired and needed more sleep. I had no idea what she felt or what she was hiding from under that cover.

Sometimes at night I pray to God to return us into the time when Mum smiled, to our small town near Sokhumi. I wonder if our town also fell. And if it did, why can't it get up again. When I was little I tripped a lot, my knees hardly healed till I fell down again. As soon as the scab dried, I would fall on my knees again and blood would gush out like mad, leaving a fresh wound in place of my brown scab. But still, I used to spring up and play as usual. I did cry a little though. Then I learnt to bear the pain. Now I understand it wasn't just physical. I learnt to withstand fear and hopelessness and everything else. I just swallow it, take a deep breath and get on with my life. If I could, I'd tell those fallen cities to do the same. I

remember our garden full of magnolia trees. A narrow path and our balcony. I remember Mum on the balcony, smiling. The sun and the smell of the sea. The winter dampness and the smell of the wet ground. Have you seen the winter sea?

We pass another turn. I slow down a bit.

'I think your kindergarten is at the end of this street, isn't it?'

Misho looks at me as if wanting to give the correct answer, but he doesn't remember. He always follows me blindly. Plays with a stick in his hand or a toy, hums and never pays attention to all those bends and crossings. He'd be a great help if he memorized them. Then it wouldn't be only up to me to remember and I wouldn't be so scared of being lost. I know what to do if we're lost though. No, Mum didn't teach me. She never for a minute imagined we can fail to find what we need in this huge city. I wonder why she trusts me so much. She believes I'll do the right thing. I suppose so though she's never said it. At night I would imagine how we were lost and then I found a way out. I looked up important words in a dictionary: Ich habe mich verirrt, helfen Sie mir bitte – I'm lost, please help me. I memorized our street name, Aachener Str. 8 and our phone number too. So now I fear less. If not the first passer-by, the second or the third will help us. We haven't needed it, not yet as I memorize every shop and street name as we walk along and my pockets are full of pfennigs. Back from shopping, I drop the change on the shelf by the front door and then put them in my pocket. Sometimes it's three or even five marks, and then I feel more confident. They might come handy one day.

We walk into the kindergarten territory full of cheerful children, swings and colourful slides. It's a bright world, no worries. They smile and enjoy life. There we stand, holding hands, looking at the playing children. I'm not sure what Misho's thinking about, but I wonder what their mothers are like. Do they smile or hide under the white cover? They may well smile. I let go of Misho's hand.

'Have fun. I'll be back soon. If you need to pee, you know who to tell, don't you?'

'Show me the clock hands when you're coming back.'

A large round colourful clock is hanging in the spacious bright hall, as bright as the world of these children playing around.

'Now it's twenty to nine. When the long hand is at twelve and the short at five, I'll come back.'

I must get to school on time. If I'm late, they'll immediately phone Mum with schachtung, michtung morgen sorgen, or something similar. Mum will be upset and will hide even deeper under the quilt. I don't want her to worry. I want her to smile.

I've got red hair and freckles. I'm slight and small, with grasshopper-like legs. I see myself as the ugliest girl, especially when I attract attention. The school hallway is long, with huge windows at even intervals along it. I'm uneasy. I feel even smaller and helpless in this enormous building.

‘Anika, Anikaaa!’

Someone calls me. I freeze. Am I late? No, there still are two minutes before the first lesson. I turn and see my Maths teacher Frau Kristoff. She smiles as she comes closer, greets and puts her hand around my shoulder.

‘You’ve got a Maths test today,’ I believe she says. I don’t yet know the language well. And I don’t understand why I need to do that test. Weeks ago Mum explained my knowledge is checked through tests. In Georgia I went to school for a bit for more than a year, so they want to find out how much I know. Is it my fault that I couldn’t learn for longer? The war began. I went to school only from time to time and finally couldn’t do even that. I was helping Mum in packing our belongings into sacks and bundles just to save some of what we had. Then we waited long for a helicopter that was to take us to safety. At first I thought Safety was the name of a place we were moving to. I suppose this city is the place of safety, but it has a different name.

‘When you see the Director, answer her questions and tell her about yourself. Don’t worry if you forget some words. They’ll give us the school programme and I’ll help you at home. Then you’ll do the test,’ that’s what Mum explained.

They did give us the school programme but Mum didn’t even open or touch it. I looked at it myself and did as much as I could. Let them check if I have managed. I might fail and they’ll expel me. That’d be good... I don’t need to go to that school. Besides, what is there to learn? The other day I carried a full bag to the fourth floor, all alone. That was after a very clever shopping trip to the supermarket – I bought lots of stuff for 50 marks, so much in fact that Granny would’ve been proud of me. But nobody praised me. Mum was asleep and Misho paid no attention to the products. He was a bit disappointed that I didn’t get his favourite chocolate. Yes, I didn’t get them on purpose though for a moment I was tempted, even took one from the shelf, dropped it into the basket but then returned it. I thought it was an unnecessary waste of our budget. That’s all right, we can live without chocolate for a day. I wonder what I am to fail in Maths...

The Director’s office is full of books. There is a desk and two big armchairs. The old-fashioned windows are draped in long beautiful curtains and the grey morning light is seeping through them. Two lamps light the office. The Director is a plump woman wearing glasses. If she weren’t called the director, I’d like her more. But she is the Director.

She points to the chair and asks me to sit down. I’m a little shaky, with the same bitter taste in my mouth. And all the while I want her to expel me so I can stay home all the time, but I know it’ll be shameful. I won’t be able to look Mum in the eyes, will also disappoint Gu. I’d better brace myself and do the test properly.

‘Are you eight, Anika?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m going to ask you some questions before the test.’

‘All right.’

‘How do you feel at school?’

I'd like to tell her I feel awful and don't like it at all, but I say something quite different:

'Wonderful.'

'Have you made friends with your classmates?'

'I have.'

'Do you need any help?'

'Thank you, Frau Mayer, but no.'

'Anika, have you passed my message to your mum?'

I passed her words to Mum many times and every time she promised to come to school 'tomorrow', but that 'tomorrow' never came. I wonder what 'tomorrow' means for Mum. Earlier she used to keep her promises. I remember if she promised buy us ice-cream, she would, immediately. A ride to Sokhumi too. Once she even let me taste real coffee brewed on hot sand. They used to have that on the beach. True, I was allowed to sip just a little. I still remember the taste. Whiffs of fresh coffee, magnolias, apple pie and Mum filled our home, back then. Mum smells best of all, no comparison with perfumes or buns.

I sit down to the test and soon finish. All in all there were ten questions.

Those with pictures were the easiest and I circled the answers very fast. Only two questions were in words – rechnung, brechnung... Something like that. I didn't get them, so I skipped them. I'm still learning the language, little by little. I don't understand everything. Often I stupidly say ja, ja or nein, and the children laugh at me.

Those kids mock me all the time. At first I thought they liked me. They would get close and touch me. Soon I guessed they did it not because they liked me, but actually they were saying I was wearing old and dirty clothes. I'm never dirty! I bathe every day, and take care of Misho too. And wash our clothes. It's true that my clothes are old. We brought along whatever we could save. Besides, we didn't board the plane immediately, did we? First we left home and sat in the car boot, then waited for the helicopter for three or four days in the open. The helicopter didn't come and we took a ride in some cars, but mainly walked, then a car again, then on foot, spent nights in the open, or in dirty basements, in the forest, abandoned vehicles, till we reached a big city. Mum would spread some of our clothes to lie on. Some got ripped and she threw them away. I'm wearing whatever was saved. Gu promised to arrive and buy us new clothes. Till then I must save money for food.

They just don't understand. If the clothes are old, they believe they're dirty.

Often they call me Russo. In the beginning I wondered how come they know the shorter version of the Georgian name Rusiko. I said I'm not Russo, that my name is Aniko. Here they call me Anika, but I prefer Aniko, just like Gu called me. Once I was forced to the huge world map hanging on the classroom wall. Those were two tall girls, I believe even older than me, but we are classmates. Then they called the others, and I stood surrounded by watchful, mocking blue eyes.

'Come on, show us where that Georgia of yours is.'

I was nervous. I had never seen such a big map. At home we had a small globe and I could find Georgia on it, but this one baffled me. I squinted, tensed inwardly and tried to find my home country.

‘Please, please help me,’ I prayed silently. My heart thumped in my ears and my hands were sweaty. I trembled, but finally I found it and put my finger on the map.

‘What did I say,’ one of the girls cried out. ‘She’s Russian! That’s Russia, you dirty stupid girl! You don’t even know where you’re from.’

It was followed by a roar of laughter. What made them so cheerful? Mocking me? Or insulting me? Or that my tiny country is so tiny on the map?

‘You’re from such a small country that can’t be seen on the map, you ugly midget.’

That was the most devastating to hear because it came from Marcel, the boy I liked most of all in the class. My heart sank. Why are they so cruel? What wrong have I done? I haven’t offended or harmed anyone, I thought. I wanted them to know how hurt I was. But they didn’t because I stood there, smiling in return. I had no idea how to react. Inwardly I’m often crushed and have that bitter taste in my mouth, but I still smile and say ja, ja, okay. I’m pretty sure Marcel will never like me. How can he? I’m a freckled red-head, shorter than everyone else and very thin. Someone who came from a distant land, driven out from her home, refugee from her own country. The country that can hardly be found on the world map. Wearing old, tattered clothes, with a younger brother and a mother hiding under the white quilt. Of course he can’t like me, but why all this hatred? Especially when he knows I like him a lot.

Marcel is a popular boy. All girls make eyes at him, write letters and draw pictures to him. Once I also drew him one, soon after I came to this school. The sun, stars, a heart and a boy and a girl holding hands. I put it on his desk before the break. When I came back, there was a large group around his desk, laughing loudly. Marcel was flapping my drawing. They stopped laughing and he approached me, threw the drawing on the floor and jumped on it. He thumped and crushed it and warned me very strictly: ‘Don’t you dare draw anything else.’ I didn’t. I just smiled at him. Oh that smile! Why smile when it hurts most of all? I sat at my desk. And wept without tears for the rest of the day.

Misho and I are going home – to the place that doesn’t smell like home yet. But it’s a safe place. Mum’s there. I ring the bell and find the keys in the pocket of my denim jacket. What if she opens the door? I can do it, of course, but I’d be happy if she got up. We wait for a while. Misho is hopping impatiently.

‘Will you fry potatoes?’

‘Sure but you must help with peeling.’

‘I’ll cut it into small pieces, but give a good knife.’

‘You’ve got to be careful not to cut yourself.’

‘She doesn’t open. Must be in bed.’

We get inside. The place is dark, the curtains blocking the light. She hasn’t drawn them. I had no time for the curtains in the morning. I put the kettle on, take some spuds

from the basket and place them in front of Misho. He makes himself comfortable and sets to peeling them with a little knife. I've given him a blunt one, just in case. It's hard to use, but he won't cut himself.

I peer into the bedroom. We've got two rooms, the bedroom and the living-room with the kitchen. Mum's in bed. Only her hair shows from under the quilt. Earlier she had silky fair hair. I loved playing with it. She taught me how to make a plait on her long hair. I always wanted to have her colour hair. And very white skin. She's beautiful even with that grey hair. When she gets up, eventually, she'll dye it. I remember Granny dying hers, which I found fascinating. Once she pitied me, jokingly saying that when I grew up it'd be impossible to find the dye to match my colour. Instead, I was happy that one day I would dye my flame-coloured head. I wonder why it's so fiery. Misho has wonderful fair curls.

'Mum, we're back. Are you hungry?' I whisper, not daring to get near the bed.

She doesn't reply.

'Mum, I did the test in Maths. The art teacher put a smiling sticker in my book. Misho behaved in the kindergarten. His shoes are too small and it hurts his feet. The sleeve of my jacket is ripped. I've made tea and fried potatoes will be ready soon. Mum, please say something. Mum, I've missed you all day. Can I get in bed with you at night? Mum?'

Mum stirs, opens one eye, then turns to the wall and pulls the quilt over her head, completely.