

The Literature Express

For Sophie

1. Tbilisi

The Russians bombed us in August. Elene broke up with me in September. In October I went to Lisbon.

I knew I'd be taking the Literature Express as early as spring, but I could have never imagined the Russians would shell us in August. Neither had I taken Elene's threats seriously. I never thought she'd be so adamant. Everything seemed to be happening at the same time. First I was told I was to travel along with 100 writers across Europe, then it looked as if the Russian bombs were about to kill me and finally it transpired I wasn't such a wingless angel as Elene had believed earlier. 'I'm sorry for the time I wasted on you,' was the last I heard from her. Then she switched off her phone. I sent her two miserable messages and gave up. I didn't beg or plead with her. The Russian bombs drained me of all energy. But prior to that someone called Koka phoned me, mentioned the Literature Express and summoned me to the Ministry of Culture.

It turned out the Literature Express was actually a train. One hundred writers from various countries were to board it and cross half of Europe over a month.

For some reason the invitation had arrived at the Ministry of Culture. Koka frankly admitted he had thought of me only when the poet Khavtasi (one of our senile ones) refused to go. There were two invitations. Koka told me initially they'd planned to send two poets (apparently, the Minister had said poets would add a certain charm to the entire trip), but then they decided to make place for me, a prose writer. In the end, it was me and a poet chosen for the trip.

It still baffles me how Koka and his superiors had come up with me and not someone else. Whose idea was it to send me to Lisbon? Others have dozens of books published while I've got one single collection of short stories... Who considered me a bona fide writer in such

a cleptocratic organisation as the Ministry? I suspect Koka (who I guess was something like the Deputy Minister) – an effeminate, mildly-aggressive provincial with sideburns.

Apparently, when I was awarded with the prize (I've received a local literature prize for my short stories), he was there at the ceremony, bought my book the next day and enjoyed it tremendously. That's what he told me.

The very same day I wrote to Heintz, the organiser of the literature trip. In reply, I received a semi-formal letter with the enclosed trip itinerary. His missive started with Dear Mr. or Mrs. Zaza. He seemed unsure who he was writing to – a male or a female. Completely confused by my first name. I wrote back saying I was a male and that Zaza is a solely male name in Georgia. Needless to say, I added some Smileys (you know, these buttock-like faces).

The train journey sent me into a state of a light shock. The idea of the Literature Express packed with poets and writers travelling across seven European countries beat me even as I tried to envision the trek.

I remember sharing my fears with Elene who, in her typically motherly-pedagogical manner, chided me:

'Don't say a word! God knows when you might get another chance like this. You must be completely inane to miss it!'

I also remember Elene and me studying the route on the map. We'd taken my grandpa's old globe to bed with us, placing it between us as if it were a baby. We looked closely at the cities the Express was to go through.

The train was due to leave Lisbon and pass through Madrid, Paris, Brussels, Frankfurt, Malbork (which we failed to find on the globe), Kaliningrad, Moscow (which I immediately bade farewell as no Georgian was allowed into Russia: we were refused visas), Warsaw and, finally, Berlin. In short, we were to cross half of Europe. 'In future, we plan to organise an European-Asian trip', Heintz said later. 'This time the money only covers half of Europe.'

Incidentally, at the time the Russian plane dropped a bomb on Mount Makhata we were in bed too.

It was five in the morning. Elene and I were woken by a deafening noise of a blast. I thought the TV transmitting tower had been blown up. It was right there, above our house and I imagined the metal monster falling on our tiny house in infernal blaze...

Elene had opened the window and was looking out.

'No,' she said. 'It's still there.'

'Where did it drop then?' I asked happily.

She stepped onto the balcony, shaded her eyes with her hand for some reason and looked up in fear.

'I'm not sure. I can't see,' she replied.

We got dressed, threw out passports into her handbag and sat down to watch TV.

'If we're shelled again, we'll hide under the stairs,' Elene decided. I put my head on her shoulder.

'It's crucial for the mobiles to work,' I said.

I recall trying hard to stay calm: I yawned noisily and joked, telling her I'd never imagined we were able to dress so quickly. Basically, I was overexcited with dread.

'And all the while you were worried about getting tired on that train. Aren't you daft?' Elene told me.

True. I hadn't counted on being killed by the Russians in August...

Later that morning we found out the bomb had fallen across the river, quite far from us, in the vicinity of the Tbilisi Sea.

That night I believed I had no one in the world as precious as Elene. That's how we'd fallen asleep in front of the working TV. She had her little handbag in her lap, I had my head on her shoulder.

We split up in a month.

As a rule I don't drink often, but if I do, it's something alarming. I don't get sour or vicious. I just laugh a lot and don't want the day to finish. In short, absurd as it sounds, I'd been talking in my sleep.

In the morning Elene was waiting for me in the kitchen. Sitting at the window, she eyed me with a mixture of disgust and irony.

'Who's Maka?' she asked.

I thought she'd read a message or something.

I'd got acquainted with Maka in Skype during the August war. She was scared stiff but foolishly-hysterically coquettish at the same time. I'd never come across anything like this in my life. She used to write texts like: 'When the Russians march into Tbilisi, I'm going to

commit suicide... But don't tell me you don't care for blue-eyed girls. By the way, what colour are your eyes?' She sounded somewhat simple and unrefined, but was a real looker.

In a nutshell, I had a kind of therapeutic and sad sex with poor Maka. True. She was on the verge of tears all the time, while I felt pangs of consciousness for treating Elene in such a ghastly way.

All in all, Maka and I met three or four times. Hard as I tried, I couldn't make her come even once. That's the reason she might have felt like crying. I'm not sure.

'We need to get to know each other better, much better,' she used to say over and over again.

How much better was I supposed to know her?

If I hadn't talked in my sleep, no one would have found what I'd done. As far as I know, it hadn't happened before. Apparently, I was so drunk I readily answered all of Elene's questions – what's easier than getting me to talk? I'm not a medium. Unfortunately, I failed to realise where I was and who was conducting the fatal interrogation.

In the beginning I found it hard to believe no one had informed her. She might have seen an incriminating message in my phone. But then I stopped caring. Come what may, I thought. Down deep I knew perfectly well the crisis in our relationship wasn't caused by that night's prattle.

'I'm sick and tired of having to drag you,' she said a year earlier, at the seaside. She must have considered splitting up at that moment. What she had thought appealing in me (my oddities typical of a writer, my lifestyle, my lovable infantilism) by then had turned into a tedious, depressing reality. Some produce piles of books and still don't earn enough, while I had published a single book two years earlier with only 400 copies sold. So how on earth would I make any money? 'At least a thousand copies need to be sold in order to get a bestseller rating,' my publisher had told me. My salary was just enough to buy me cigarettes (while I still smoked). I did receive a literature prize but still live off my parents. I go to bed at four in the morning and wake up at midday, but only as a courtesy as I can easily sleep till later. Looking through Elene's eyes, I used to find it awkward, now it's this novel I find embarrassing. I go to work twice a week, write a couple of ads, mess around a little and come back. And now, on top of everything, it's someone called Maka I'm after. In short, I seem to be a complex problem for Elene. Or rather, was. Not anymore.

‘I always feel down with you,’ she admitted that morning, ‘because you’ve always got some problem or another which I’m obliged to solve for you. You’re not an angel, strictly speaking, so it’s not worth sacrificing my life.’

The house we rented at the time (chosen by me but paid for by Elene) had withstood the August shelling together with us. But I vacated it in two weeks after she left me.

‘You can stay if you wish,’ the owner told me. ‘You might find someone to pay for it.’

I didn’t want to stay as everything there reminded me of Elene, so I moved in back with my parents, into my teenager cell.

I sent her only two messages. I didn’t persist.

And in October I flew to Lisbon together with the poet Zviad Meipariani.

He had brought along a literary newspaper in which some poet-critic vehemently disparaged us. The author criticised Koka (and the likes of him) of the Ministry of Culture for selecting us, rumbling on: What sort of writers are they anyway? Why have they and not some other, worthier writers been chosen for the seminar? He claimed I was helped by my mum (she is the Vice-President of our national Chess Federation), but was sparingly critical of Zviad: He is not bad, but there are others, million times better poets. In short, he assaulted me more passionately, calling me ‘the author of a heartless brochure’.

‘We don’t give a damn, do we?’ Zviad wisely suggested. ‘We’re on the plane already, while the dick’s in his lousy office.’

I wasn’t perturbed in the least anyway and didn’t need his encouragement. I immediately guessed he was uneasy about the whole thing and tried to hearten himself with the words.

Later I found out he wasn’t disturbed by the article at all. The truth was he was scared stiff of flying and, like any Georgian in similar situation, drank himself unconscious. I was sure he’d puke all over me at landing, but he didn’t. The flight was uneventful in this respect.

If I’m not mistaken, I had decided to write a diary novel then and there. I wanted to keep a record of my impressions. Of what happened and of what was about to happen. I just had to find a place for the war and Elene. Zviad already was a designated character.

What I didn’t know at the time was that another Helena in my life would become the main character of my novel.

This is the diary of a month-long pursuit of Helena.

2. The Plane

Helena was a still far away. While I was suspended somewhere in mid-air, she might have been driving to the Athens airport with her husband.

There was water beneath me – the Black Sea.

As a rule, the outward flights from our home airport leave early in the morning. I believe it's explained by the fact that the night sky is cheaper compared to that of the daytime, which is sufficient ground for all the vampire air-companies flying to our country to passionately hate the daylight. Our flight was no exception – we were to take to the sky at four in the morning.

Zviad had insisted on getting to the airport three hours ahead of the scheduled flight. Not two but full three hours. I've firmly learnt from my childhood that one absolutely has to be there two hours earlier and I've got nothing against the long-standing tradition. I'm all for these two hours, but three was somewhat unexpected and, to tell the truth, a little alarming. It was when I first suspected that the man was an epitome of the classic Georgian male fretfulness, which meant spending the entire month fighting his pet-worries. Could these three hours be an indication of something much more sinister to come?

I have to admit I also tend to be gripped with a kind of pre-departure hysteria. I sometimes believe I might lose my way in a huge airport or worse, I can get mistaken for a wanted terrorist, unable to convince the airport authorities with my broken English that *I'm* someone else.

I detest those seconds when my passport is checked by foreign officers (I don't fear my countrymen). I abhor the minute I have to stand behind the glass awaiting the paradise pass from a green-uniformed alien.

At times like these, I try to look as gentle as possible, my expression saying: Such a pity you don't know me. *I* mean no harm. *I'm* as law-abiding as you are.

I guess the Europeans don't suspect such complexes exist. One has to come from the former Soviet Union or be a survivor of the 80-ies in order to understand these fears. The

fear of making a mistake. The fear of misdemeanor. The fear of pissing in the Vienna airport toilet designed for the handicapped and being obliged to pay the fine out of the miserable amount you managed to save for your trip abroad. Why have you urinated in the toilet for the handicapped, citizen?

To cut it short, I also feel a little uncomfortable before departure, but the poet Z. Meipariani certainly overdid in this respect: he phoned me five or six times, compared the info on his ticket with that on mine, repeating over and over again that his brother-in-law was going to drive us to the airport. Finally, hearing I was planning to take a nap before the flight, he made a heart-rending confession: he hadn't slept for days and lost any wish to go on living. He was 16 when he'd last flown – his uncles had taken him to Moscow to bring back his deceased great-aunt. No wonder his memories connected with air travel were far from cheerful. It was then, in the plane toilet, when he wrote his first serious poem. 'It was a strange feeling,' he told me. 'We were up there, in the air, with my great-aunt in a bag.'

Zviad started drinking in the airport, couldn't find his passport in his pocket when needed, kind of crashed into an energetic, hypocritically smiling doll-like air-hostess and then, already in his seat, rammed his knees into the seat in front. 'That's it, he's going to piss everyone off,' I thought with a sinking heart, regretting I had accepted the invitation to join the Literature Express. I couldn't help thinking Zviad was only a tiny link in the chain of misfortunes.

Customarily, I'm a bit depressed in the morning, so no wonder 4 a.m. isn't my brightest hour. The war two months ago, Elene dumping me, sleep-deprived passengers, inflatable life jackets and an utterly unrealistic survival procedure demonstrated by the air attendant, along with puking packets and drunken Zviad, depressed me to the extent that I seemed to be seized by the characteristic anxiety of all Georgian males – the fear of novelty.

'I'm suffocating,' I remember thinking as I positioned my forehead in the direct line of the weak fresh air current coming from above.

I wasn't sure why I was going, why I had to be torn away from my comfortable routine for a whole month, why I was there so early in the morning among all these strangers – a bunch of aggressive psychopaths.

Yes, I felt bad, pretty bad, but at least one thing was crystal clear – sleep was the only escape route from drunken Zviad and hypocritically smiling air-hostess. Falling asleep was the way out. For self-preservation.

‘Zaza, are we airbourne?’ Zviad turned his puffy red face towards me.

‘Not yet,’ I replied.

My guess was he couldn’t bear to look through the window.

‘We humans are so miserable,’ he muttered with the desperation of King Lear and sunk into his personal phobias: with his eyes closed, he began producing funny spurting noises with his lips and nodding his head in the manner of a coquettish jazz lover. A foreigner with dyed hair sitting next to him (unquestionably a foreigner because of his unnaturally popped out eyes and a tense smile) gave me a horrified look. He had no explanation for Zviad’s behaviour.

In short, we were all terrified: I of the unknown future, the foreigner of Zviad and Zviad of flying. My poor colleague was unaware he’d already become someone else’s horror. Was it completely inconceivable that this suspicious muttering was an indication of a far more sinister danger looming ahead of us? Could it be nothing more than a prayer? But it’s no secret how petrified the well-organised Anglo-Saxons are of praying during flights. So what if the plane just left a Christian land – an audible prayer is invariably dangerous!

And what images might have flashed through the foreigner’s mind: a dark-haired man (poet Z. Meipariani) jumping from his seat as soon as the plane straightened, stabbing the air hostess (exactly at the moment when she was offering apple juice with an annoying hissing S sound: ‘With iccce?’) and then the plane heading towards an Arab country. Or, possibly, to the Christian Copts in Africa.

He was glancing at Zviad with deep concern. I thought he was about to send his wife a farewell phone message, as prescribed: We’re hijacked. Love you. Wish I’d told you more often.

‘Zviad,’ I nudged the nodding poet.

‘What?’ He opened his eyes.

‘Are you praying?’

‘No. Why?’

‘What are you doing then?’

‘Nothing. I badly need a pee.’

‘That man thinks you’re a terrorist. Please, stop it.’

‘Who?’ He sat up.

‘Him,’ I indicated the passenger next to him. The man smiled back at us with his glass eyes.

‘What’s it I’m doing?’ Zviad smiled back at him.

‘Nodding and spurting.’

‘I’m writing a poem,’ he laughed. ‘No guts for terrorism!’

He unbuckled his seat belt and rose.

‘You can’t leave your seat yet,’ I grabbed his arm.

The foreigner was visibly scared of even looking at him. He stared at the seat in front and turned into a stone passenger.

‘I’m going to burst if I don’t take a pee’, Zviad said and nearly trampled the poor man, practically pressing his bum into his face and stepping over his knees. Then he wobbled towards the toilet.

I’m rather selfish. Elene ran from my egotism and not from me. But that’s another story. ‘I don’t give a damn what he does,’ I thought looking up at the panel with the crossed cigarette and mobile phone and red-lit seat belt signs.

The thick-legged air-hostess reached Zviad before he got into the toilet. In the meantime I put finger-nail-sized rubber plugs into my ears, telling myself I was alone. There was no Zviad.

It didn’t take much to put him back into his seat. A couple of strict words uttered by the thick-legged hostess did the job. I’m pretty sure he didn’t protest only because he wasn’t on a Georgian company flight, otherwise he’d certainly haggle with each and every passenger and possibly smoke in the toilet as well.

‘I shouldn’t have drunk,’ he said as he took his seat.

I pretended I was asleep. I wasn’t in the least interested what he had to do and what he shouldn’t have done. Content with the results of the policy of ignoring him, I fell asleep.

However, I was soon woken up by a jolt. ‘Just turbulence,’ I reassured myself and looked at the miserable chap. He was asleep with his mouth agape. He might have pissed himself for all I knew. The foreigner with the dyed hair seemed to be still immobilised by a

wicked witch. It smelled of food on the plane. I rested my head on the porthole and peered down. We were flying over the Black Sea.

Before I dozed off again I remember thinking I needed to write something about the sea. Can you recall many Georgian writers depicting the sea, producing marine stories, novels, plays or poems?

There was a two-hour literary void underneath.

As it often happens at the moments of complete idleness, I began thinking of a new plot. I wanted to come up with a marine plot, but to my great annoyance, I ended up with one single image out of all the possible ones related to the Black Sea. I might have nodded off as I pictured a middle-aged seaside village woman going into the water in her light dress. I've often witnessed such a weird moralistic tradition: the village women tend to bathe in their light summer frocks, always stay close to the beach, hold their naked grandsons tight, happily splashing and loudly giggling in the shallow...

I clearly remember getting angry with myself for such an idiosyncrasy: the sea is so vast while I got stuck with these women.

3. Lisbon

There we were, the poet Z. Meipariani and myself, at the airport exit, looking for someone holding up signs with our names. Hundreds of people arrived, plenty of those waiting with the signs in their hands, but no one with our names around. All unfamiliar names.

Those passengers who had arrived with us found themselves (or their names) quite easily, while Zviad and I stood there, at the exit, lost and seemingly stranded.

I already knew my next step: I had Heintz's phone number, also someone Iliko's (I was told he was a Georgian student living in Germany, supposed to be a kind of a guide for the two of us). I meant to phone them if worst came to worst.

'Have we been dumped?' Zviad asks a rhetorical question. His tone reveals he's not particularly worried as he's got me.

'The Germans would never do that,' I say. 'Out of question. Have we muddled up?'

‘Arrived somewhere different, Zaza?’ Having calmed down, Zviad feels like joking.

In the meanwhile I register a comical and at the same time (if looked deeper) sad reality: what one of the tanned young man wearing well-polished shoes has on a piece of paper are actually our, Zviad’s and my names and not those of some obscure household items:

Mr. Xaxa, Mr. Jviadh, welcome to Lisboa!

Yeah, you have no idea how insulting it can be to walk up to a Portuguese in well-polished shoes and tell him you are that Xaxa, that he’s been standing there awaiting something like Xaxa and Jviadh.

‘Don’t they have a Z?’ Zviad asks me in astonishment while I shake the young man’s hand and give him an insincere smile (actually hating him).

‘Hi, I’m Xaxa.’

‘Zdrastvuite’, Zviad greets him in Russian, revealing a simple fact that he doesn’t speak English.

The bus we were led to fully reflected the post-Soviet conflicts of the 90-ies: the Armenian writers, Anait, an elderly woman, and Mr Artur Zeituntsyan, occupied the front seats; Mr Eldar Aliev from Azerbaijan (I’d have been utterly surprised if he had a different surname) sat midway, while the Chechen poet Raul Aldamov occupied a raised seat at the very back. The Russians climbed after us, greeting everyone with a Hello with a heavy Russian accent. One was younger (later called the Little Russian), wearing glasses and a beard, the other was red-faced and older (consequently, the Big Russian). The latter had a thermos in his hand.

The Armenians endowed us with parental smiles and adopted a pleasantly reserved attitude, conversing in an unhurried manner. I couldn’t figure out their relationship: were they a husband and wife, partners or just colleagues? Both showed signs of dignified aging, but one couldn’t say they were old. I decided the woman belonged to an elite category of Armenians – a silvery scarf wrapped like a turban on her head and a pair of tight jeans across her fleshy thighs.

The aroma of Europe reached me as soon as we left the airport. One of my acquaintances had told me Portugal was the backwater of Europe, which I had immediately and foolishly accepted. With an air of wizened sophistication, I had even shared this

knowledge with Zviad, who wasn't burdened with rich travelling experience. No sign of a backwater though – it was paradise on earth! It's us who live at the back of beyond. Once I accompanied Elene to Tkibuli on a business trip. I went for fun and found myself in real hell! The parched hills were covered with windowless, burnt apartment blocks. People inhabited only the ground floors of these ten-storey buildings. The impression was that the high-rise structures were put up in the pre-Ice Age. I wouldn't be surprised to come across dinosaur eggs in one of the abandoned flats. Chiatura, another town, was even worse – the place looked as if an atomic bomb was dropped on it a couple of weeks ago. Rusty trolley-buses seemed to be suspended in the air. In the past, there were cable cars connecting the town with the surrounding mountains. Now torn cables were hanging down everywhere, some stretched as far as the half-demolished houses on top of the hills. Trees and bushes protruded like antlers from the rooftops of the Stalin-time factories, or rather what was left of them. Looked like the continuation of the ground. Occasionally, what I thought to be solid ground turned out to be a half-buried rust-eaten skeleton of a truck or a trolley-bus. Something transformed into a sickly landscape, a pathological extension of the nature.

Portugal was magnificent. Even the healthily shining highway which I could see from the window of our ethno-conflicting bus.

The soft-spoken Armenians were obviously stuck with not particularly talkative or enthusiastic co-passengers that we embodied. We were both extremely sleepy, hardly managing to utter a word or two. Zviad's and my souls seemed to have been stranded in yesterday's Tbilisi.

Later it transpired that the Azeri Eldar Aliev was the most famous writer among those from the Caucasus. Even Zviad had read one of his crime novels. Detective Kraus (or someone similar) was created by our Azeri colleague, the author of over thirty novels. The thought that this man dressed like an MP came up with crime stories beat me. He looked like a Communist Party senior I'd seen in my childhood. He was smartly dressed and treated women with exaggerated respect.

In truth, any decent European would have committed suicide if obliged to take a ride on our bus. The air itself was vibrant as the most politically incorrect tension was rising high.

It's awful how irritating we find someone without even knowing them. You have no idea the kind of books they write, what features they possess, whether they're generous or

baleful. But if you happen to be, say, an Armenian and the other person an Azeri, you're automatically expected to hate him. I had no clue about the personal traits of the Russians on the bus, but I found them abhorring. The bomb-dropping people. Weren't they killing Elene and me just a month ago?

In short, if not for our respective countries, the climate in our bus would have been as agreeable as that in the bus carrying the Scandinavians.

We met Iliko, the Georgian student, in the hotel lobby. Other Iliko-like students welcomed the rest of our group. I had visualised an emaciated lad combining his studies with part-time odd jobs. I was right in the latter two, but my guess was a far shot when it came to his age and appearance – Iliko was a worn-out, rather heavy bachelor with thinning hair. He was wearing a threadbare jacket, no doubt bought at one of those legendary sales, the type you expect an eccentric sci-fi film character to sport.

Iliko and Zviad instantly disliked each other. I, on the other hand, immediately took to this strange, all-knowing man. I like being advised on everyday practical matters. And I hate being mobilised. That's why I'd fallen for Elene. She was in charge, she took the decisions. That's how it worked for us.

I can't say Iliko reminded me of her, but he was very good at ordering people around. Zviad, it seemed, was annoyed by exactly those features that I found appealing.

'You'll be given the keys now,' he snapped after a brief introduction-welcome. 'The registration point is over there. You need to get registered and then go up to your rooms. There's a meal at 3 o'clock. They gave us some shit for breakfast, but come down anyway. It's good to be seen and you can grab something.'

He was irritable but attempted to joke. It was his manner of speaking.

'If that's how they feed us in Portugal, I dread to imagine what it's going to be like in Poland,' he laughed and led us towards the registration tables set up at the lifts.

In one of the corners of the hotel lobby there was a registration point set up for the Lit-Express passengers. A smiling but severe young woman shoved medium-sized bags and barked information at us (she was German speaking angry English):

'You can find our itinerary and maps in your bags, also the participant photo-catalogue, money and your room keys. We have to assemble in the hall at 5 this afternoon and get to know each other.'

Her name was Irmeli. She had blond hair and round glasses.

Iliko spoke to her in fluent German and even made her laugh. In the lift he told us: 'She's a kind girl, but quite neurotic. Know her from Berlin. She had a crush on this Turk tea-trader.' Then he sighed ruefully. 'I haven't had sex for eight months. It might be worth considering her...'

Zviad and I were allocated rooms on the ninth floor, Iliko was on the eleventh. Zviad's windows overlooked old Lisbon, mine – the new part.

Soon Iliko knocked on my door.

'Have you got slippers in your room?' he asked.

I had a look around and indeed, I found a pair of soft slippers under the clothes hangers.

'The rogues! I don't have them. You might as well have a bathrobe there,' he said peeping into the bathroom but finding nothing to his interest.

'They must have given them to the writers, no?' He sulkily looked down at my hotel slippers.

'You can have them if you wish,' I said. 'I've brought mine.'

'Can I?' His eyes brightened up.

'I never leave Tbilisi without them.'

'Yeah, these are real good,' he said stuffing them into the pocket of his checkered jacket. 'They aren't meant to be for one-off use, you know,' he explained. 'You can use them for a time, so why leave them behind, right?'

'Oh,' he turned in the doorway, 'have a rest before the meal in two hours.'

As soon as I closed the door behind Iliko, Zviad called me.

'How do I phone Tbilisi?'

I thought I was surrounded by maniacs. Controlling my disgust, I patiently dictated every number to be dialed for the call.

The meal mentioned by Iliko was laid out in the hotel breakfast hall.

Iliko introduced us to Heintz and Rudy:

'These are our bosses.'

Heintz was a withered man of undetermined age. Rudy was a tall centaur with four earrings I managed to count in his left ear.

Laughing, Heintz reminded me of his mistake as he shook my hand:

‘Mrs. Zaza!’

I laughed loudly at his joke and was joined by others.

‘They say the Caucasians don’t easily forgive such mistakes,’ he went on with a smile. ‘I told Rudy I made a fatal mistake and will be killed for it. But he calmed me down, saying you’re a writer and will let it go.’

We all laugh even louder at this. Rudy is frightening, laughing like a robot: his eyes are empty, his mouth closed, while the sound comes directly from his lungs. Heintz becomes serious again:

‘Have you met your colleagues?’ he asks, immediately answering his own question: ‘Some of them haven’t arrived yet. We’re expecting more tomorrow.’

‘It’s good you’re alive,’ Rudy contributes to the conversation. ‘There was a lot of talk about your war.’

That’s exactly how he puts it: your war.

‘Yeah, when the Russians bombed you, we were very worried’, Heintz agrees with Rudy. ‘It was awful,’ he says shaking his head in commiseration.

‘We plan to take it out on the Russians here,’ I say laughing.

Heintz laughs too, but Rudy looks tense. He feels I’m joking but doesn’t fully trust me. Who knows what I’m capable of?

‘It’s quite peaceful now, isn’t it?’ Heintz asks.

‘What peace are you talking about?’ Iliko winces. ‘They’re bringing their army into Abkhazia and South Ossetia! Do you know where Ossetia is? Right in the heart of Georgia. Akhagori... it’s a town.’

‘I know Gori,’ Heintz volunteers. ‘It’s Stalin’s birthplace.’

‘No, no,’ Iliko becomes agitated. ‘Gori is different. It was also shelled, but Akhagori is a bit higher,’ and he begins drawing an imaginary map in the air. ‘No Ossetians live there, only Georgians... But now the Russians have taken the town, which means they’ve occupied the whole region. Do you understand? Now, Tbilisi, the capital, is only a forty minutes’ drive from there. So, if they want, they can be in Tbilisi in forty minutes. They can easily crush us in mere forty minutes.’

‘How dreadful,’ Heintz sighs, but he’s worried only for the sake of being civil – his gaze darts to other guests. On the other hand, Rudy listens to Iliko very attentively, with an angry expression. However, I’m not sure if he’s angry with the Russians, the Georgians or his Chancellor.

‘We’re practically conquered,’ Iliko laughs for no apparent reason.

‘I believe it’s George Bush’s fault,’ Rudy concludes.

‘What does Bush have to do with it?’ Iliko sounds surprised. ‘It was Putin who bombed us, not Bush! Let’s leave it to the Iraqis to swear at Bush. It’s Putin who’s killing us,’ he laughs again.

‘Enough of politics!’ Heintz stretches his arms like a TV host. ‘Shall we leave politics behind and only discuss literature in the train?’ He turns to me, ‘You didn’t tell me if you’ve met your colleagues.’

‘I have,’ I point at Zviad. ‘Back in Tbilisi,’ I chuckle.

‘Are you laughing at me, man?’ Zviad looks confused. He finds it hard to believe I’m capable of betraying him and side with the people speaking a foreign language.

My joke is appreciated by Rudy with the sound:

‘Ha.’

That’s his laugh.

‘Enjoy yourselves,’ Heintz commands and moves away. Rudy follows him like a slave.

‘Are they lovers?’ I ask Iliko.

‘Rudy’s new,’ he explains. ‘I used to know the previous one.’

‘See what’s going on here?’ I point out to Zviad.

‘Are they my kids or what? I don’t give a damn!’ He explodes.

‘Let’s have a look at the food they’re offering.’ Iliko moves towards the long table.

Looking rather miserable, the Armenians stand aloof, helping themselves to some meat dish. The Russians have already changed into sandals. The Big Russian is wearing a pair of green shorts, showing his white legs (just like grandma’s) – withered and hairless. No sign of the Chechen and the Azeri. A heron-like man (the Belgian poet) seems the most gluttonous: stretching his long neck, he inspects all the sandwiches on all plates, then eats some with an expression of disgust and great doubt.

I had no wish to meet anyone. I even regretted I had to spend a whole month looking at these faces. Exhausted by lack of sleep, I mechanically stuffed an assortment of colourful food into my mouth.

‘Hello, Georgian!’ I was surprised to hear Armenian Zeituntsyan address me in my native tongue. With my mouth full, I didn’t reply, just nodded in the noblest way I could manage. Iliko was talking to a elderly lean woman, while Zviad was putting tiny salmon sandwiches into a napkin. I thought it was an ideal moment to sneak out, so as soon as I drained my glass of orange juice, I edged towards the exit. On the way I smiled at Heintz and Rudy and even showed a thumbs-up sign. That’s how I rated the supper.

Now it’s hard to remember where I’d seen Helena for the first time: at the lifts or at the hall door. Where was it exactly that my one month journey acquired meaning?

2 October. Lisbon.

I succeeded in having it my way. We’re in Lisbon.

He thinks *I*’m still a child. *It* drives me mad. Would it be better – me in Athens, him over here? ‘Do as you please. *I* don’t mind.’ Keeps repeating for the last seven years... But still sulks when *I* do as *I* please. We kind of talked in Athens. ‘*I*’m old, bla-bla-bla...’ The concert at the Herodion. Mozart. Symphony sol major. Mahler Chamber Orchestra. Hardly managed a page and a half. Don’t even remember what *I* wrote. We smoked. Matsek drank in the airport. He’s ‘punishing’ me. Says: ‘You’ve been flirting with Eugene. But that’s only natural.’ And he means a gay chap! *I* say, ‘You’re not sure what you want. *I* know what *I* want: *I*’m with you and that’s it.’ He sent some money to his elder son. Cracked jokes: ‘You’re fit to be his wife, not mine.’ *It*’s been like this for the last month. He’s been pretty muddled since he talked with Mum. ‘*I* promised your mum *I* wouldn’t stand in your way.’ Screw you both! We arrived to Lisbon yesterday. *It*’s the third seminar this year *I*’m accompanying him. We’re to be on a train for 30 days. *I*’m not sure whether it was a good idea to come with him. Am *I* stubborn? He easily lets me on my own. Believes he’s controlling it as well. ‘*It*’s better for you. You’re just obsessed.’ *I* refuse to believe he’s so conceited. He had a drink and became

jealous of Eugene. He's real when he drinks. How wonderful it was in Nancy! The day after tomorrow we'll be in Madrid. All sorts of people here. But the same, in a way. *I* have a feeling they're the same we saw in Nancy and Constantinople: notepads, shorts, glasses, pipes, beards... (even women!). The boss is German. With a round bum. But gay. They're all gay! That's why he feels safe for me to be on my own. *I* shouldn't have brought the black dress. All women are dressed like hikers here. Matsek pretends he doesn't care.

I'm too lazy to write this

4. The Train

Helena. I take pleasure in writing her name in Latin letters. I recall the first seconds, minutes and days spent with her. Writing her name reminds me of my first impressions of Helena.

Helena. A stranger. So attractive. I never thought Latin letters could excite me so much.

Helena reminds me of her slightly rounded belly, the line from the belly-button to her chest, the taste of her lips, the unnaturally shiny breasts, the nipples hardening at a touch, her black hair coming down her back, her knee at her mouth and the way she bit it when I entered her.

When *I* entered her.

How strikingly un-sexual my mother tongue is! What the hell is this 'when I enter her'? The Georgian language can't stand a sexual act. If you decide to describe an intercourse in my language, it becomes either unbearably high-flown or amazingly aggressive. Nothing in between. When *I* enter her or when *I* fuck her. You have to choose either one or another, but I like neither. The former is uninteresting and dead, the latter loveless and irate. There's no sex in Georgian – only a hint at it. But I refuse to hint at what I want to describe. I prefer to be straightforward about my feelings and emotions. I'd love to say how Helena bit her own knee when we had sex. But I lose all interest for the episode because of the words that come to my mind. Where's passion when one has to write: we had sex?

Well, yes, there's yet another possibility, for instance: while we screwed. Sounds like swearing at the person you love. However, there's a medical term as well: coitus. But that's

neither medicine nor sex – it’s just daft. And all the while, I’d like everyone to fall for Helena as she bit her own knee in the act... I’d hate to spoil a lovely episode with the grotesque by adopting the pretentious sex terminology fossilised in my native tongue.

As I writer I’m not happy with the Latin writing of Helena. Helena is a human choice, not that of a writer. Barbarisms annoy me greatly – only tasteless writers revert to writing their sweethearts’ names using the Latin alphabet. That’s my conviction, for some obscure reason. But still, something’s going on inside me when I write H E L E N A. Her name written in Georgian only reminds me of how we parted and not the passion we had for each other. Helena in the Georgian script depresses me. Saddens me. I realise I let something precious slip through my fingers.

It’s true I can’t recall where I first saw her (near the lifts or at the hall entrance?), but I’ll always remember what she was wearing. Later, when I described her clothes in detail, she was visibly impressed and that’s not my imagination. I didn’t want to make a mistake, so I concentrated hard and came up with an exact description of her clothes she had on that day. The previous Elene (sorry, Elene, for mentioning you in this way) found such things fascinating. Women never dress ‘casually’ – they always consider the context, so they invariably remember what they were wearing for this or that occasion and why. Everything is carefully and consciously chosen, the problem is interpreting the meaning. When I told the previous Elene she was wearing green jogging shoes at the time we met, her solemn reply was she hadn’t cared for me and wished to express exactly that. Do you get it? I’ll never buy such crap! She just wanted to look like a girl fed up with male attention. That was the message sent and that’s how I was to interpret her green jogging shoes.

Helena looked like a film star. She floated into the lobby like a movie ghost... She was holding hands with her husband, dragging him along as if he were a stubborn child.

What do I remember?

Her white dress, her white teeth, her cheek bones, her black eyes and a glittering silver chain hanging down her neck and resting on her tanned chest.

I failed to notice at the time, but later her burgundy lips, an ideal oval of her fox-like face and a slightly narrow chin became extremely important.

Helena didn’t look at me then.

I don't seem to exist when it comes to foreign women. They just don't see me and that's a fact. I'm a mere foreign spectre living my own life – well outside their sexual and aesthetic interests.

I did look at her, thought her attractive and forgot about her then and there.

In an hour I was in my hotel bed, trying to go to sleep and praying Zviad wouldn't come knocking on my door ('Wanna drink, pal?'). Apparently, I was heard in the heavens as that day I was spared the unwanted company. I was safe.

The whole next day, however, we spent roaming the hilly streets of Lisbon.

'In the 18th century the entire city was razed to the ground by an earthquake,' Iliko told us. 'But I'm not interested in the royal Lisbon. The real city is out there, behind those houses. Yesterday I even came across street football.'

Iliko headed for small taverns without intending to spend money in them, though.

'Let's not sit here, let's just have a look,' he suggested. 'Think of the pittance we've been given,' he turned on the organisers. 'Are we supposed to starve or what? All Germans I know are misers.'

Zviad was carrying two small bags he'd bought for his children. He'd got two mini-bear bags made in China at one of the street stalls.

'You could have bought them in Tbilisi,' Iliko reasoned with him.

It was a sensible comment. For the entire month Zviad kept buying things he could have easily found in Tbilisi markets. He definitely had a knack of finding dismal shops and stalls, which became clear for me in Lisbon. As opposed to Iliko, it didn't annoy me in the least.

'Why on earth is he wasting his money?' he raved. 'If he bothered to walk a little further, he'd find better stuff! One should leave him among black beg-traders, then he'd be really happy. He's got nothing to do among writers! The likes of him feel miserable here.'

'We're visiting other cities, you know. Don't spend all you've got here. We won't be given any more,' he warned Zviad like a strict teacher.

I'm not sure if Zviad was miserable in Europe. All I know is we felt terrified when we were taken to our train. No, it wasn't the train itself that was scary – we were daunted by the number of writers and poets! We'd only seen their tenth at the supper the previous evening. Many more had arrived and what's more, they were all drunk. My heart sank. I hated the

idea of meeting them, remembering their names and seeing them day in day out. How I hated being with new people!

I remember sharing my fear with Iliko.

‘Don’t worry,’ he calmed me in his typical way, ‘they hate you too.’

The Estonian poet looked most ominous: a shaved head, a goatee, a leather suit and plenty of metal hanging down his neck. More importantly, he was alarmingly fat and disturbingly wobbly.

‘I hope we’re not in the same compartment,’ I gave Iliko a frightened smile.

Neither was I thrilled with the train – it’s our touristic trait: we, Georgians aren’t easily impressed at first sight. I had expected a modern, shark-like steel structure but was staring at a colourfully painted steam train. The carriages were painted in yellow and brown with LITERATURE-EXPRESS written all over them – horizontally, vertically and in circles.

We soon found out that only we, the Georgians felt dejected. Others were laughing, talking loudly, shouting, drinking and meeting each other in an enthusiastic way. Heintz was at one of the carriages, talking to reporters. One of them had an enormous camera on his shoulder, while an aging sound-boy shoved a bushy microphone at him. Later I saw this footage on the Net and when I glimpsed Helena in the background, my heart missed a beat, then quickened as I watched the five-minute long coverage at least ten times.

The Georgians are so miserable! We expect danger from all sides, so we tend to frown in advance. That’s the way we defend ourselves. The problem with Zviad and myself is easily explained: both are the products of our native Tbilisi, scared stiff of strangers, eyeing them with suspicion and utter distrust. But what was wrong with Iliko? He behaved exactly like us at the time. But, thank god, not for long. One of the trip organisers, blond Milena, came running and gave Iliko our carriage and seat numbers.

Iliko is a true womanizer. He goes for any female, regardless of her looks. And of course, her character isn’t even worth mentioning. He doesn’t believe in long-term relations so he shows no interest in finding what women really want or need. He only cares for the easily approachable ones, which saves him efforts in putting them to bed.

You can’t imagine how he transformed when Milena appeared. He joked with her, laughed raucously and even brushed her freckled arm with his hand.

That day I spotted fair hair in Milena's armpit. Quite long at that. Later I discovered more long hair on her white thighs.

'I like it,' Iliko said. 'She's the nature's daughter. No need to shave!'

I was prepared to argue but at that minute Heintz sounded an old-fashioned silver bell and let out a loud, neurotic laugh.

'We're due out!' Iliko yelled.

Some of the passengers got their cameras out and took pictures of Heintz ringing the bell.

So very original: Heintz ringing the bell. So cute!

We found our carriage number 6 and made it to our seats, a bit sweaty though. There were no compartments, which meant we were saved from sharing one with the weird Estonian. We couldn't see other ex-Soviets. We were among unfamiliar people, smiling at them without saying anything.

'How long is it to Madrid?' I asked Iliko.

'We're supposed to spend a month on the train, so how do hours matter?' came his philosophical answer.

Soon we moved out of the station. The train produced a howl-like signal for departure. We all laughed. Had we been alone, we definitely wouldn't have, but being uncertain what to do, we laughed. Firstly, in that way we reacted to the howling sound and, secondly, we expressed affability towards each other: *Isn't it wonderful that our journey has started?*

Next I witnessed a comical show: in an instant everyone turned into writers.

All stereotypes came to live simultaneously.

They all drew out writing pads, turned on their notebooks, spread papers across the tables, held pencils in their mouths and stared out at the changing landscape with silent admiration. The little man with a goatee sitting across from me took out a newspaper with his own photo on the front page, put it on his knees and started reading. He was Paulo Tesheira, a Portuguese writer-journalist, a silent photographer, who watched his colleagues with his small, sly eyes – just like a secret agent.

An unbelievably comical show was unfolding: suddenly everyone was a writer. A French grandma in jeans (Mm Roget) was jotting down her thoughts in her ancient notepad;

bearded young man with long ringlets (Vitas from Lithuania) was hitting the keyboard of his laptop, while the Czech speaking the Elfin language (Iliko's description of his German) was writing in a lined notebook. The writing bug had bitten everyone on the Lit-Express. These people tremendously enjoyed playing the role of a writer – their zest for literature was mind-boggling! Could it be that this kind of behaviour was natural and it was me being inadequate? Me with a confused-ironic-stunned expression? Should I have also pulled out a notepad, taken a minute to think and transferred my impressions and emotions onto the paper, just like everyone else? Yes, I was absolutely sure they were recording their impressions of that very minute. They felt comfortable – like genuine writers, poets or whatever. Felt great in short, attempting to record this wonderful moment of romantic-professional-spiritual comfort. Right there, before my eyes, an enormous heap of pulp-fiction was created. Literary surrogate in huge amounts – texts not worth a penny! No one on the face of earth could have convinced me that at the time – on the train just out of the station – anyone had anything fascinating or valuable to say. They were nothing but cons! I had a feeling that the entire space was filled with their artificial, one-off plots... I'd have gladly joined them as a chemist or a laryngologist – anyone but a writer. Their literary passion put me off my profession in a matter of few seconds.

Nudging me, Iliko poured a bucket of icy water over me by saying:

'Now you see why they're doing so well?'

'Why?' I asked in surprise.

'Because they work!'

'You don't say so!' I laughed. He was inane.

I'm not sure if it was my reaction that irritated him but suddenly he attacked Georgian writers and Georgian literature in general. He was so vehement that Zviad and I exchanged stunned glances, as if just sworn at.

'What's going on in Georgian literature anyway?' he began. 'I haven't read anything Georgian in twenty years.'

What could we say in reply? His question was asked in such a tone that instantly prompted us our answer had no importance whatsoever.

'You're a closed nation,' he announced. 'The entire Georgian literature is one big provincial crap! First it was the rural problems, then all these drug-addicts and the shit of the

90-ies! Are you copying from each other or what? And this disgusting egocentrism! I haven't read a single Georgian book when I'd be able to forget the author. I'm reading this shit and I'm haunted by the fucking author, with his ghastly stubble and empty pocket, reeking of cigarette.'

'Do you know any other word apart from shit?' Zviad laughed, but his face was already flushed.

I didn't utter a word. I agreed with Iliko in practically everything.

'The poetry is tasteless!' He raised his voice annoyed by Zviad's remark. 'Provincial, pathetic and tedious, sheer epigonism! Who needs such claptrap? Who's gonna be interested with this shit?'

'Do you consider the entire Georgian poetry tastelessly provincial?' Zviad asked with childish naivety.

'I do, all of it!'

'Including Rustaveli? Good for you!' Zviad laughed but actually was pretty upset.

'Theirs is a dynamic process, but what's going on in Georgia? An illusion that something's happening... In reality nothing at all. Everything's dead, isn't it?' Iliko turned to me.

'Are you by any chance writing at your leisure?' Zviad asked him, furtively glancing at me. 'You seem suspiciously knowledgeable. And you don't sound as if you read a Georgian book twenty years ago.'

'Who says the Georgians have got books?' It didn't sound ironic anymore. Hatred and sarcasm came gushing from Iliko now. 'If they're real books, why aren't they sold here? Why do they refuse to read your books about your junkies here?'

'Very little is being written,' I interferred at this point. 'You can't compare us to the Germans and the French. In our country five people read books while two write them.'

'And those two are either about themselves or junkies!'

'There are other themes. You're behind times.'

'The same old shit, I bet!'

I didn't think it was worth arguing with him. I was too lazy for that. Besides, he was partially right. Also, Zviad's guess had to be correct: he sounded like an angry writer, not a frustrated reader. There are some who fear publication, or rather horrified at a failure of

their publication. He must have been working on something, a text he kept editing, tearing up, returning to it and as time went by he got more and more convinced he was far from completion. That's the reason he was permanently irritable: he took literature with such a lot of responsibility while the likes of us, half-bred writers, had the audacity to publish our literary garbage.

'Experimenting isn't helping either,' Iliko preached. 'I used to believe experiments were necessary, but I don't think so, not anymore... Because everything turns into an experiment in Georgia. You just can't get past experimenting...'

'Wait a second,' I interrupted him. 'Look at these people. Are they better off? They write the same kind of shit as we do. When was the last time you read a good book?'

'I haven't read anything in five years.'

'Didn't you say twenty?' Zviad asked.

'Twenty years of not reading Georgian stuff, five years of the rest,' he answered with a deadly serious expression.

Because you're too mean to spend money on books, I thought to myself, but said nothing.

'Ah,' Zviad sighed, 'I'll have a smoke.' He rose to his feet.

'Where?' Iliko sounded alarmed. 'Don't smoke in the toilet. It's not allowed.'

'Why would I? I'll find a smoking corner. There has to be one,' Zviad sounded insulted.

'I'm not sure about that,' Iliko said severely. 'You have to give up smoking.'

'Writing too, ha?' Zviad chuckled and looked at me. He always looked my way whenever he made a joke. 'I'll find one.' He moved away.

'Is he your friend?' Iliko asked me.

'Want to criticise him?' I laughed.

'Do you like his poems?'

'They aren't bad.'

'Can I find them on the Net? Has the bugger published anything?'

'He isn't a bugger. He's got an army of fans.'

'Of ugly girls.'

'But sexy.'

‘No way,’ Iliko grimaced. ‘I’ve never heard of an enthusiastic reader being a beautiful girl in Georgia. A reader should be sexy enough for a screw.’

He’s a maniac, I thought and liked him even more. I had no more doubts he was a secret writer. Only a true writer could fantasise about sleeping with a beautiful reader. It wasn’t a typically reader fantasy.

‘But that’s not the main point,’ he looked drained now. As was his habit, he soon changed into a despondent chap. ‘I still prefer the new ones to the old. The bugger, I’m certain, writes in a more interesting way than those of the 70-ies.’

‘He’s not a bugger!’ I protested.

‘Doesn’t matter. He’s better than the old ones, isn’t he?’

‘I don’t know,’ I shrugged my shoulders. ‘I don’t really care.’

Suddenly I was too weary of the banalities I was hearing. As if ejected from my seat by an invisible force, I sprang to my feet, frightening Iliko as I did so.

‘Are you off for a cig?’

‘Nope. For a pee. I don’t smoke.’

Having walked through two carriages, I concluded that the most zealous and active writers occupied our carriage. Others were clearly more reserved compared to our co-travellers.

Helena was in the eighth carriage. She was wearing white again (pants and a T-shirt) and was scribbling (!) in her little book.

As soon as I saw her I remembered I liked her the previous evening.

Helena also looked at me and though I hadn’t done anything wrong (We had just looked at each other, no harm done, right?), I instinctively threw a furtive glance at the man sitting next to her.

Helena wasn’t wearing a bra. Her T-shirt bulged revealingly. Did the man notice that I had noticed?

It was odd. Foreign women normally ignore me, but this one looked at me.

I don’t remember what I did. I believe I smiled at her and walked past. Nothing else that time.

5. Madrid

This is a city of squares and kissing couples. I've never seen such a number of young people kissing each other. Wherever you look, you see passionately kissing couples.

One lad with a crew-cut stuck in my memory particularly vividly. He didn't give his poor girl a chance to breathe. I was sitting in a cafe in front of our hotel and wasn't in the least keen on watching them, but I couldn't help looking at them. It was absolutely impossible not to notice what was going on. Generally speaking, I'll never get accustomed to ignoring people kissing in public. I know perfectly well I have to get used to not reacting, I have to learn not to show surprise and take it calmly, but I still can't help staring and feeling irritation: Doesn't our presence get in their way? Don't they find us redundant? I've always doubted (and will still do) the sincerity of publicly kissing people. Okay, I understand it when the young people just fallen for each other can't curb their feelings – they are drawn to each other like magnets. But what do long-standing couples find enjoyable in socialising their passion? Or do they only get horny by exhibitionistic kissing? If left alone, they might not even as much as look at each other.

The crew-cut and his girlfriend definitely were old-timers. They weren't swept by love fervour: their kissing was more like a sport, very similar to what porn actors do. The lad was leaning against the wall, pressing the girl closely and holding her buttocks in a tight grip. They seemed to be intent on setting a new world record – ten minutes of non-stop kissing with closed eyes.

Despite my irritation, I believe it was while watching their exertion I thought it'd be good to have someone, to have a chance of kissing that white girl...

When we arrived in Madrid, Iliko passed on Heintz' new order:

'Tomorrow you're all going to be taken to read out. Have you brought your writing? You can choose a fragment.'

'Am I supposed to read in Georgian?' I asked in surprise.

'Yeah. Everyone's doing their own language.'

'They won't be able to understand a single word!'

'I don't give a damn!'

‘I prefer the poets to read aloud. I hate that.’

‘The poets are also expected to read out, don’t worry.’

‘I don’t care if they do.’ I can be extremely stubborn at times. ‘Let’s pretend you haven’t told me anything.’

‘It’s offensive. No one will understand if you skip it.’ He sounded angry. That minute I must have irritated him immensely: he couldn’t stand irresponsibly egocentric Georgians. I was being just one of them at the time.

‘What’s there to worry about, it’s just reading aloud, isn’t it?’ Zviad told me.

As opposed to me, he was ecstatic he was given a chance to demonstrate his talent. I had heard he was exceptionally skilful at reciting his own poetry. On the whole, I like hearing poetry read by the authors. Good ones are really very impressive. At the same time, I absolutely hate actors reading literary excerpts.

To cut a long story short, that night I fell asleep with the decision I wasn’t going to read anything, but, as expected, I was uneasy at it all. You might choose not to believe it but I was scared of Heintz. Definitely scared, which pretty much describes how I felt about him. Somehow he managed to turn us into unresisting slaves and did it with a wise subtlety. I caught myself at it and noticed others as well: for some obscure reason we all tried to please and flatter him. Without even realising why we felt the need to do so. Could it be that he had given us money? Normally people feel grateful and sympathise with those who give them money. Or could it be that, like a true German, Heintz was an expert in manipulating human minds by applying various psychological methods? I’m still not sure whether it was hypnosis or something else, but we all tried – to a varying degree – to deserve a warm smile or a kind glance from him.

As soon as we woke up the next morning, we headed for the Prado, though Iliko refused to accompany us.

‘I hate museums,’ he said. ‘I prefer live people.’

He was lying. I was absolutely certain he had spent days and days in Berlin museums... Young, penniless and inquisitive.

Curiously enough, only us, the Azeri detective writer, the Armenians, the Russians and one Bulgarian went to the Prado. There was no sign of the ‘western camp’ in the museum.

I was wearing beach flip-flops as I felt less like a tourist and more comfortable. The Russians resembled clowns in their multi-coloured hats and with huge cameras. The Big Russian was in his customary sandals.

I could sense Zviad's uneasiness at my flip-flops. He looked at me several times and eventually said something I didn't expect from him:

'You're childish.' That was his appraisal of my eccentricity.

The Little Russian followed an example of some Japanese tourists and took a snapshot of Bosch's Hell. The museum attendant shouted at the top voice it was forbidden to take pictures. Strangely, no one forbade the Japanese, while he was yelled at.

'The Russians are disliked everywhere,' Zviad concluded.

The Azeri writer of detective books treated me to a sandwich and juice. With bits of food clinging to his teeth (just like mine, I guess), he asked in a fatherly tone:

'Are you a poet?'

It must be disquieting to be obliged to give a positive answer if you are one. Isn't it comical to say, *Yes, I am a poet?* It's much more modest to say, *I write stories.*

'We are colleagues then!' he rejoiced.

'Indeed, we are.'

'I gather I'll listen to you today,' he smiled at me.

He was going to listen but would he be able to understand? Did he think I planned to read in English, Russian or Azerbaijanian? Or did he know Georgian?

'I don't think I will be reading,' I winced. 'I don't like reading to a lot of people.'

'Do you?' Eldar was surprised. 'Such a pity.'

'Yes.' Then I added, more to convince myself, 'I don't suppose I'll be reading.'

Contrary to my principles, at seven that evening I was in the hall, waiting for my turn to read out loud to the assembled colleagues.

I don't know what forced me to walk into that hall or what made me change my mind that evening. Was it my slavish compliance with Heintz, the sense of tactfulness, the fear of being exposed as an unruly participant or the conceit – a powerful drive behind any ambition? You're a writer too and should be among your colleagues. So what if only Zviad and Liko are going to understand you? The main thing is for the organisers to see you there, so that they know they haven't wasted their efforts and expenses on you.

Or was it simpler and more dignified? Could it be that I wanted to see the girl I bumped into in Lisbon and then saw in the eighth carriage?

Whatever the reasons, I found myself in the literary Babylon. The writers read their pieces in their native languages, blushed, waved their arms, fidgeted and howled, but, alas, failed to make us understand. God knows how much we craved to be heard, how much we wished our work to be appreciated by the listeners! True, we only understood our own languages, but was it possible that the audience would exercise their intuition, audio or some super-natural sensors in order to realise we were reciting extraordinary texts?

There he was, an Albanian, giving an emotional, sing-song recital of his poem or whatever it was. I'm pretty sure had I known Albanian, I'd have enjoyed some of it. But all I heard at the time was a flow of harsh, unpleasant sounds gushing in a strange Italo-Slavonic accent. No doubt, my recital would leave the same impression on the listeners – my mother tongue was bound to sound unsavory, a mere cacophony of guttural noises. An introduction in English might have helped though: Please listen carefully as Lord will judge you in this language. My native tongue is the language of the Doomsday. Had I been bolder, I'd bring forth the infallible authority of Ioanne-Zosime...

Throughout, Heintz' face showed sheer delight. He was listening without understanding a word! And all the while, with visibly throbbing veins, the writers exerted themselves, sweating, flailing their arms, tensing their muscles in an attempt to prove their talent and uniqueness.

Suddenly it dawned on me that Heintz and Rudy were nothing but conmen. They had planned that reading orgy just to proudly claim later that: 'We created the conditions where all writers got to know each other. The evening was extremely interesting and significant for everyone involved.' What was interesting? The way we howled and bawled but remained deaf and dumb?

All in all, I was able to follow the Russians, Eldar Aliev from Azerbaijan (as he wrote his books in Russian), a Dane who read his poem in English and a lovable grandpa from Belgium (who I initially mistook for an Englishman). However, this Bernard Shaw-like, white-bearded elderly man spoke English with such an accent that I missed most of his poetic-philosophical essay.

Had I lived in the Medieval Europe and been an inquisitor chasing heretics, I'd have definitely introduced the following torture: I'd make heretics listen to a text in an unknown language to them until they confessed, pleading guilty of liaising with the Devil. Having sat through our international literary evening, I had no doubt the method could be highly effective in owning up to all possible or impossible sins. How would it feel if you were a decent German heretic with the sound knowledge of German and Latin, a little Ancient Greek as well, but were made to listen to the Koran in Arabic? You'd confess to anything, wouldn't you?

It might have been the sound of my native language that cheered me up or else Zviad's poem was really good, but the fact is I was wide awake, starting to like this man. Suddenly I realised Zviad Meipariani wasn't an insignificant poet and got terribly angry with myself – why did I persevere in hating him and on what grounds? Zviad sounded like a deacon reading a prayer. He attempted to cue the audience to the rhythm of his poem, to keep them on the same wavelength and by all evidence he succeeded: as opposed to others, his efforts weren't futile. Everyone listened. No irritating noises, no rustle or whispering. Zviad managed to grab their attention in full. In the meantime, I was swept by the most sentimental banalities: there he is, a poet from a country inhumanly bombed, his grief genuine and acute. What country is that? Oh, Georgia? Yeah, Russia dropped bombs on them a couple of months ago... Now it's crystal clear why his poem is like a lament. But do we feel sorrow, do we feel like crying? Of course we do, he succeeded in making us cry...

O, divine naivety! What tears, what sorrow! My foot! Who was there to remember the bombs! But aren't we exactly like that? What do I care what's going on, say, in Pakistan? We are just another Pakistan for them.

Zviad was even awarded with some clapping. Flushed and content, he stepped down from the dais. Beads of sweat glittered above his upper lip.

'You're really good,' I told him.

'I know,' he smiled happily.

Then it was my turn.

The way I had to walk between my seat and the dais seemed endless. I had my short stories in my back pocket (a small book, not even a hundred pages). My hands were shaking as if I had a Parkinson's disease. Dreadful! I willed them not to, but they kept shaking as if of

their own volition. Still trembling, I found the story *The Red Forest*, greeted the audience in English, adding that I wasn't particularly good at reading aloud, so my story wasn't necessarily that bad. I attempted a joke, but no one laughed. Only Heintz was smiling. I guess that was part of his genial disposition towards the whole event. As usual, I was caught off balance by my own voice distorted by the microphone. Why on earth does our own voice sound completely different from the inside? I wonder if anthropologists have any explanation. Many years ago one of my classmate's birthday party was filmed and then the tape circulated among all kids' families. I still remember my shock at hearing my voice... I refused to believe those high-pitched, alien sounds were produced by me. This strange-sounding, unfamiliar but definitely my own timbre still baffles me. I'm not sure if it was just to quell my uneasiness or from sheer shyness, but I began to read barely louder than a whisper. All I wanted was to go through one single paragraph and return to my seat having done my duty. I soon heard the rustle of the bored and the weary (the noise I made myself not long ago when others stood at the microphone). So I sped up, murdering the long paragraph complete with complex sentences with great dignity and immense hatred.

That girl, Helena, was sitting in the front row. When I looked up from the page I was reading, she was the one I saw. Strangely enough, I failed to notice her on my way to the dais. I can't say she was listening with close attention, but she was watching me with unmistakable interest. I even began to question if she understood Georgian. Sitting with her legs crossed and frowning at me, she had her hands crossed in her lap, looking with a mixture of fear and concentration. That minute she was like a small animal – dark eyes, longish nose and sharp chin.

It was impossible not to notice her legs. I did notice them. What I didn't know was whether she had a tan or it was her natural olive skin. Her right thigh was divided by a long line at the perfect, absolutely ideal place. I called it the sex-muscle.

Since I arrived, it was the third time I came across Helena's dark eyes. Until then, before climbing down from the dais, I'd thought she was attractive, nothing more. I hadn't gone further, even in my fantasies. Everything changed that evening. I believe that moment I got seriously interested in her.

I clearly recall shoving my book into the back pocket of my trousers, coming down from the dais and smiling at Helena. She didn't take her eyes off me – I actually believe she

even turned her head to follow me as I went past. No smile though. I was confused. You smile at a foreigner and don't get one in reply? Such things never happen in Europe.

5 October. Madrid.

I bought a pink caterpillar for Iako. 8 euros. An ice-cream seller Barbie and a blue shirt for Piso and Antoshka. 12 euro and 4.80. A lighter for Zaur – 3 euros. I saw a pair of shoes for Ekuna, but thought 35 was too expensive. I'll find something else. Besides, they had a silver line at the sole, so she mightn't even liked them. And yeah, I got myself a grey waistcoat – 15 euros. Had it on at the reading this evening. And a reproduction of Bosch's Hell – 1 euro. All in all, I've spent 54. Our per diem is nearly 600 euros. Yesterday's 50 have to be taken off too. I need to spend more carefully. These guys look down on street stalls. Zaza's cool, a real man. The other one's a prick. Dresses like a clown. Lectured us on literature the other day. Today I shut his fucking mouth with my 'Dead Hours'! I read in my old style, with my endings. There's a woman from Croatia here. She shook my hand saying I was real good. In general, the level's pretty high. Some serious poets. I liked the Russian and a Spaniard, Miguel. He broke the rhyme, like a cardiogram. I thought it cool. They let us read only one poem or else I'd read 'The Rooster's Prayer' as well. I supported Miguel with 'Super! Super!' Now we're buddies. He gave me an album with his poems and his wife's photos – she's naked. No bra, no panties. She was standing right there and he introduced her to me. She definitely looks better on the photos. Apparently they're old. Now her hair looks different too. We spoke with our hands. He'd say 'Robert Burns', for instance, and I'd go 'Oh!' He blew kisses, so did I. We communicated with names, so to say. Probed each other's tastes. I managed to make myself understood. Then Zaza and I walked through the streets. I am impressed with Madrid! We went to the Prado (I bought Piso's Barbie somewhere there). Zaza's pretty reserved. Looks like he needs women's company. He pointed out every kissing couple he came across. I haven't yet found a key to him. He keeps to himself, but watches you closely. I'm surprised a woman with balls like his mother can have such a tactful and quiet son. He can't stand Ilika and sticks to me. Like a younger brother. If interested in something, it's only me he asks. I tell him it's my first time in Europe, can't he find someone

more experienced? Two years ago everyone supported Menabde with his short stories, but the prize was given to Zaza's book. *I'd also thought Menabde deserved it. When I got acquainted with him, I changed my mind. He hasn't taken after his mum, nothing in common. Kind-hearted and somewhat pitiable. He's young but already has got grey streaks in his hair. Liko is absolutely disgusting, always getting at the boy. He dares not try it with me. Must be afraid. Apparently, he's Tsertsvade's group-mate. Said he used to write denouncements on others for the Party. I'll tell Tsertsvadze about his reputation in the European Union. Eventually, Zaza's going to kick his ass. He's getting on our nerves and it'll be stopped when we're fed up. I've been carrying 'Evrinoma's Dance' with me for a whole week, but haven't written more than three lines. Poetry has less chances here compared to prose. And it's only natural. How are you gonna translate 'The Rooster's Prayer' into English? And they haven't got [dg] and [kh] sounds if I'm not mistaken. If I manage to adopt the correct schedule, I'll be able to write. I'm sitting in my hotel room, at the window, looking out at the night city, trying to capture my impressions of the moment and put my emotions onto paper. I wish my lovely Khatuna Tkemaladze were here with me!*

We're off to Paris tomorrow.