

**Ekaterine Togonidze**

## **Home – You**

### **Synopsis**

The novel is set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Tbilisi, where Nia, a young actress lives with her bed-ridden daughter Gabriella, 14, suffering from the fear of exclusion. Nia blames her husband, Demna, for the girl's condition. From the narrative we discover that when Nia was on a shooting location, the city was badly affected by an earthquake, practically destroying the family house. At the time, Demna and the girl were at home, but when the walls began to crumble, instead of saving his daughter, Demna fled, which caused Gabriella to develop such a syndrome. Nia severs all ties with her husband and is forced to move out of the unsafe house, becoming a single mother taking care of the girl who has fallen into a deep sleep. Hard social conditions and unsuccessful career make Nia's life even more unbearable. Dreaming of leading parts, she is obliged to accept supporting roles, even uncredited parts. Depressed by constant failure to achieve success, Nia contemplates giving up her career altogether, but before making that decision, she allows herself one last attempt.

Nia finds out that a well-known director is shooting a film about the war in Abkhazia. The protagonist is a young refugee who escapes the war zone by taking an arduous walk over the Chuberi Pass, but loses her baby on the way. After the audition, Nia gets the leading part because the director sees a certain inner connection between the protagonist and the actress. Although the shooting is hard, Nia's life changes radically: her financial situation permits her to enjoy some material comfort, and her social life becomes more diversified. While she is busy on the location, her mother and a carer look after Gabriella.

Every evening Nia talks to the sleeping girl, tells her about the shooting and Demna as well. It is through these talks we learn that Demna is a refugee too: after his father was killed in the Abkhazia war, together with his aunt Nani he, a little boy at the time, took the perilous road over the mountains to safety.

Once, when Nani visits Nia to see Gabriella, she talks about Demna's childhood and remembers the day their house was shelled in Sokhumi. It transpires that when Nani's Abkhaz husband ran to save Demna, he was killed, while the boy miraculously survived. Not having heard the story before, Nia is deeply shocked, even feels pity for her ex-husband.

Occasionally, Nia remembers the day she met Demna and the whole romantic period that followed, how unusually he revealed his love by saying an Abkhaz phrase 'I see you well' that is the equivalent of 'I love you' in Georgian. Sometimes her old love re-surfaces and she tries to justify his actions at the time of the earthquake. In an attempt to reconstruct the event and possibly even exclude Demna's fault, she goes to the destroyed house and talks to some witnesses. However, it is obvious that the father left his daughter in the face of the terrible disaster, so Nia's fury and hatred replace all other emotions she might have towards her ex-husband.

Shooting of the film deeply affects Nia, especially her role and the story. While filming a particularly dramatic scene showing the perilous escape route the refugees took over the mountain pass, Nia's attention is drawn to a 13-14-year old boy walking with his mother. Holding her baby, Nia inches forward, sometimes crawls, but can't help looking at the boy. The scene brings Demna's story to her mind. She wants to touch and hug the boy but her feet refuse to obey. As if through the time machine, she seems to transfer to Demna's childhood, which enables her to better understand the hardship he experienced. Above all, Nia is devastated by the fact that her film character, exhausted, hungry and cold, falls asleep by the fire and in the morning discovers her baby froze at night. For her, the events of the film reflect the reality of her own life: being exhausted and sleepless, Nia confuses the film with the reality, loses the ability to differentiate between the spontaneous decisions made in life and those prompted by the script on the shooting location.

As Nia dozes off during a break in filming, she dreams of Demna and hears his voice. Soon she realizes it's not a dream and that he has really arrived. The reason is revealed: feverish Gabriella had high blood pressure, but unable to reach Nia, her mother phoned Demna. They rush home from the shooting location and, quite unexpectedly, he recounts his memories of the earthquake, saying he has no recollection of how or why he fled when the walls began to shake. He cries bitterly and apologizes.

The plot of the film, Nani's memories and Demna's confession completely change Nia's attitude. Once, while talking to her unconscious daughter, she tells her that at the time of the earthquake Gabriella was at home with a little boy, not her father, and that the boy knew that the only way to survive was to run away, because one can only escape death by fleeing with all one's might, and that his boy had learned that lesson well. It was such a flight that saved little Demna in the past, and Gabriella too, because she wouldn't be if not for him.

At the end of the novel Nia allows Demna to visit his daughter. Waking up one day she discovers Gabriella isn't by her side. She looks out of the window and sees Demna kneeling by the girl's wheelchair. In order to see better, she uses her mobile, zooms in on the scene and records it. Suddenly she gasps because she clearly sees Gabriella opening her eyes really wide.

'I see you well, very well,' she utters in a quivering voice. Then she sends the recording to Demna, whom she has forgiven completely.

The final words of the novel are Demna's reply: 'Me too. I always see you very well.'