

Blackbird Blackbird Blackberry

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Well, although I've one foot in the grave and my blood drains like a spring after a drought, my ovaries still ache before my period begins, just as they used to when I was a girl. That's what woke me this morning. But I know it's a bit early and won't start today, perhaps it'll be tomorrow or the day after. It'll knock me off my feet, but today it is just a warning; my body telling me to get up now while I still have some energy. And since it's better to get up now, I do. My laziness subsides. I'd better do everything today. Why? Because a menstruating woman's hand is useless: whatever she touches turns to ash and disintegrates. A menstruating woman shouldn't work because her work will be blown away by the wind. That's what they say. And that's what everyone is made to believe—not by the men, mind you, but by exhausted women so they can enjoy two or three days rest each month without the usual housework.

Although it's fiction, I still believe it. I follow the rules. After all, I, too, am a woman. Don't I need some rest? Even if I have no husband or child to look after, no yoke weighing me down, I still have my chores. That's why I follow the rules. Here, I'm already up. I'll wash my face, put my dress on, and even try to squeeze into my bra. Who knows? It's still very early, but I might bump into some wandering drunk in the street. Moreover, it's summer now and the streets are always packed. Day and night. Loads of people, cheek by jowl. When I'm dressed, I'll pick up my beautiful red bucket. I carry it lightly on two fingers. Blackberries gleam so in this bucket so much that when I put it down that I can hardly bear to take them out to cook them. I have a good look at them first.

It's the half-light just before dawn. A neighbour's cockerel is crowing somewhere in the distance. I close the gate carefully and a revolting smell immediately assaults my nose; it's that disgusting smell, which these days has almost become the smell of summer. No matter whether people live here or are visiting, they all cruise about in their cars and won't even take two steps on their own feet. And the smell of that car exhaust lingers in the air as if it will never go away. It burns your

throat and makes your eyes water. There isn't the slightest breeze, so nothing's moving. My knee is starting to ache; alas, it's going to rain. It will rain a lot. That's why it's better to leave now. And so off I go.

I'm very excited. I walk lightly, as if I'd wings. There's no way the women from the other village will beat me to the fruit. I'll pick those thick ripe blackberries before them. Hey, I've even got a hook and a pair of gloves. I'll be savouring those ripe, thick blackberries on long, gloomy winter mornings. You know the mornings I mean, don't you? Dripping, damp, cold winter mornings. Mornings when you can't be bothered to get out of bed, when you're tired of life. Days when you simply can't even stick a leg out from under the warm quilt, when you can't be bothered to exist, or even to breathe. Do you know what got me through last winter which was just like that? Blackberry jam! I would spoon some onto a hot piece of bread baked in the oven the night before, and have it with some tea. My word! It melted in my mouth! I'd also dip some bread into my tea. I still have all my teeth, but you can't be too careful. Really, the blackberry jam was the only reason I was glad to get up early in the morning: blackberry jam and some toasted bread. Come on, Etero. Get up, so many pleasures are awaiting for you! It really was the only reason to get up. Isn't that the fact? It really did make it easier to get up on those cold, wet days so as to open the shop and stay there all day long. And that's why it's worth going out now, walking along this deserted road like a shadow. Look, even the stray dogs aren't barking. They are lying half asleep by the roadside.

There, once I cross the bridge, those blackberries will start to glow at me. The Rioni is muddy and noisy. My knee aches and the air is muggy, which means it will rain. I am sweating already but I'll still get there in good time, I'll pick all the berries, and then those women from the other village can get stuffed. They'll find the bushes picked clean.

I am almost singing as I go, I feel so light that I can begin to forget the pain below my waist. I can hear the rumble of a car in the distance; some drunk must be on their way home. Otherwise, it's quiet except for the sound of the rushing Rioni in my ear and the dawn chatter of a couple of blackbirds. And here I am at last, standing in the middle of a clump of thorny bushes with my bucket and hook. I'm even wearing some colourful gardening gloves. But I feel restless. It's because that man is coming soon, isn't it? Come on, admit it! It's him, isn't it? It's because you'll see his white hair again soon. And your heart is racing, isn't it? Come on, Etero, say it! What if I do? What if my heart is racing? It doesn't show. Nobody can tell. It's as if nothing is happening!

Good girl! Well done! Keep going! I can't remember when I last felt so excited. But isn't he the same? A man of his age?

I am moving along the line of thorny bushes, but my good mood has evaporated. All the blackberries have been picked. All of them. Only some are left here and there, the unripe ones or those the birds have pecked. They must have dragged themselves here yesterday at dawn! You're left with nothing, my girl! Here's one bush, there, two bushes, and more over there, but they've all been picked! I am about to burst with rage, but the lightness of my mood prevents me. Fine, I say to myself, there must be some further on, those witches couldn't possibly have picked every single berry, could they? Over there, where the bank is being eroded by the river it's covered in bushes, they couldn't possibly have reached them, could they? They could never have got there, but I can with my gloves and hook. I'm tall but they are short, stunted, like crops grown in parched soil, or struck by a hailstorm.

What kind of hook did that man grab you with, Etero? Aren't you too old for all that, woman? Isn't he? But a hook to the brain, an arrow to the heart, and the feeling of butterflies in your stomach don't respect time or place, do they? No, they don't! What it is about this man? I am not afraid of him. He is a stranger, but that's why I don't fear him. And he is an unusual man, boyish even. He isn't lying in wait for the chance to look up your skirt or blacken your name. He isn't like all the others. He's neither tense nor pushy. He doesn't drink much and doesn't get rowdy. He's old, but he's light with it and kind. He's constantly laughing, or looking at me with a smile. When he comes into the shop, he's always polite. I don't need to chase him off or become a hedgehog when I see him. He comes and goes calmly, quietly, nicely. Sometimes he can't even look me in the eye, he blushes a lot and goes red. Imagine a man of his age, blushing! I swear his ears go red!

There you are! Those rabbits from the other village across the gorge didn't dare come here where the bank has eroded away. You can't even see through the undergrowth that the ground is unsafe. My blackberries are glowing right there! Further along, the Rioni is churning away everything in its path, carrying off silt and sand. So, ladies, you didn't dare come here, did you? Couldn't reach the berries, you dwarves? The ground is giving away and dangerous. You can't tell it's unstable if you didn't already know. Step on it and it will give way and take you slipping and sliding all the way down into the water!

The Rioni is washing everything away here. In two or three years, these bushes will be gone. There'll be nothing left. I remember how this place was in my childhood. Only half of it is left now, the wood and the riverbank. The wood has suffered more: there's barely anything left of it. But I remember it as a child. I couldn't imagine a more magical place anywhere in the world, nowhere was more beautiful or more enchanted. You would go in to the wood and never want to leave. The sun's rays could barely penetrate the trees, but when they did, the light would pour down as a shower of golden rays. And so many birds made their home here. All those songbirds! In spring, their chorus would reach every single window of the village. And how it smelled! It was the smell of life itself! When we children ran into the wood we'd scatter, chattering and twittering, to gather mushrooms or play. We played hide and seek or soldiers, and many other games. What better playground could there have been than the wood? Where could we have found a better place to play? So much so, we'd forget to come out to go home. And now? What's left? Nothing except a few old logs, dried roots and rubbish scattered everywhere! The whole wood was cut down for firewood during the terrible times of hardship, and even now people continue to dump their rubbish here. That's why I can't bear to see this place! We all deserve to be torn up by our roots and washed away by the river!

And do you know what I'll do now? I'll be careful. I'll walk along these bushes and fill my bucket. But the berries it contains barely cover the bottom of the bucket. So, I place it on the ground next to me, testing the earth with my foot to make sure it is firm, and then try to pull the branches closer to me with the hook without touching the berries so as not to damage them. Squashed berries are useless, aren't they? They turn to mush and almost rot before they can be made into jam. You have to bring the blackberries to the boil just once, no more. That's how I make it. I cover them with sugar, leave them to rest for a while, then boil them. Who was it who told me some nonsense that a woman really becomes old when she starts making jam? Was it Tsisana? I think so. By that logic, I reached old age last year, dear Tsisana! What am I supposed to do about it? I'll just have to cope. I can deal with that but not with waking up in winter without my jam. Oh no, my dear! I love blackberries too much, I love the way they float in their own juice, those whole black berries. Blackberries bring colour to those unbearable, gloomy winter mornings.

I can almost feel that winter cold in my whole body right now. Even in this hot summer heat, I can sense the frozen room and the cold stove, the way my steaming breath freezes and is suspended in

mid-air, and the windy, damp, dark weather outside. How when you stick your nose out from under the quilt it freezes like a withered bud that has arrived too early. When you can't be bothered to move at all, let alone get up, even if your bladder is bursting. When it's so cold outside that you can't even be bothered to get up to release the warm pee from your body; you lie motionless, and if you could, you'd never emerge from your warm burrow of bedding. But you've no choice, you must get up. So finally, finally, you gather the courage to stick a hand out towards your clothes that are stuck on top of each other. First, you lift the top half of your body, then the bottom, and start to dress quickly, very quickly. I almost begin to shiver at the thought, even on this boiling hot summer morning. In the meantime, I've almost picked an entire bush. I must grab the other one with my hook now. So, Etero, how did that man manage to hook you? How did he land you? Isn't he the reason that you wake happy every morning with the rising sun? When was it again? It was last Friday when you waddled into Mediko's shop, and that man was there. When I say, 'waddled', I mean Mediko called me, laughing, and told me her fridge was broken and her ice cream was melting so I should come and eat it before it all melted away. I hurried over immediately. What else was there to do? Actually, I didn't see him at first. Apparently, he was leaning against the broken fridge, going through the melted ice creams, humming, and grinning at me from under his arm. *'Which one would you like, Etero? White? Or chocolate? Choose, it's my treat.'* Mediko was laughing loudly the while. My aunt was an evil, unkind person, but what she used to say about Imeretians was true: they all 'grow in lighter soil'. She was right! Mediko's from there. Who else would laugh if their fridge broke down?

I swung my hook again, and his grey head flickers in front of my eyes again, and I stagger as I am startled by something black that flutters in front of my eyes. What could it have been? Has it gone? Has it flown away? Oh, it's a blackbird, a blackbird with a yellow beak! There were so many blackbirds in Domna's garden! Oh, my God! My heart is about to leap out of my chest! And the ground underneath my feet is falling away! I knock the bucket aside with my left hand, and with my right I tightly grip the hook which is caught on a blackberry bush! My bucket starts to roll and rolls all the way down to fall into the muddy Rioni. Holding onto the bush with one hand, I close my eyes. God help me! I open my eyes and it's all gone, the blackbird, the blackberry bush, all gone, all I see is the foaming, roaring, grey, silty water! The river has taken my red bucket and swirled it away; the waters carrying it off so beautifully as if they were dancing together.

Oh, my God, help me! It's only now I realize that it's only my hands that are stopping me from falling. My feet are scrabbling desperately in the soft sandy soil, as if dangling in mid-air. I can't find a foothold. My hands must save me! Your hands must save you, Etero! I try to wriggle my way up on my back, but my back is sliding, my feet are sliding, and I feel my heart is about to stop beating, or so it seems. I am going to fall and the Rioni will carry me off and pull me to my death just like my red bucket! God, help me! And, yet again, the white-haired head of that blasted man pops up in front of my eyes! God help me! I'm still sliding down on my back when my body tells me to move to the right, come on, Etero, shift yourself to the right! Is it my body telling me that or is it his voice in my ears? I can't tell. To the right! You must move to the right, Etero! And this is what I do as I tighten my grip on the handle of the hook caught on the bushes. Good thing I'm wearing rubber gloves and my hands aren't slippery, otherwise I would surely have lost my grip since I can feel sweat trickling down my spine; my breasts keep me from sliding down this slippery soil! I have grabbed some root with my left hand; it feels firm, and pray it will bear my weight! It simply must! I lift my whole body, and with my right hand I grab at the edge of the slope, which seems quite solid here. It's no longer collapsing, thank God! I lift my entire body, clenching my teeth, feeling the soil on my gums that has fallen into my mouth. Now I must lift my right leg. My upper body is already back on the edge of the slope, but my left leg is still dangling in mid-air. I close my eyes to avoid seeing the silty water below me and hoist the middle part of my body up. There! I made it! I made it! I didn't fall! Safe at last, thank God! I am lying on my back on the unstable slope. I freeze, unsure what hurts more, the strained sinews in my arms or my grazed thighs? And here comes the sun, peeking through the clouds! Instead of death, it is the sun that is shining down on me, as if upon a queen!

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I follow the path home, my hands empty and my head drained, trying to avoid being seen by anyone. It is still very early, yet at my corner somebody is already throwing out their rubbish, but by the time I get there whoever it is will have gone back in and they won't see me. My left hand is burning and so is my badly grazed right leg. I think I even have a few thorns stuck in me here and there. And on top of all that, I can't stop the quivering in my knee. I walk, trembling as I go. I praise you, O Lord, for saving my life! But now I am even more scared than I was before back there, when I was hanging on for dear life. I am so scared now that I feel defeated and have a heavy

heart. Look, I even seem to have torn my dress. Thank goodness there's no one to see me. If I had fallen in and been washed away by the Rioni, who'd have asked about me? Nobody! God, tell me who'd have remembered me? Nobody! No, somebody would have, someone, surely? Wouldn't someone have found my shop closed? Ah, but they'd think I must have gone to town, to Terjola. But when did I ever go to Terjola in the middle of the week? Surely, they'd never think that, would they? Well, Tsisana wouldn't. She would have guessed that I couldn't have gone to Terjola. When did I ever go anywhere in the middle of the week? Wouldn't they try to call me? But when would they try to call me? In the afternoon? Would it be Tsisana? Or Neno? *'Where are you, woman?'* she would have asked. It would have been either Tsisana or Neno. Who else could it be? One of my customers? Who else besides Tsisana and Neno knows my number? Oh, the distributors do, of course! That stupid man would have rung me, after hanging about in front of my shop. How many times would he ring? Two or three maybe, perhaps even four. Then he'd leave. What else could he do? He has other things to do, doesn't he? How long would he have waited in front of the shop? I'm sure he'd try the door handle once or twice. *'Etero! Etero, girl, are you there?'* he'd have called timidly. He'd surely try to call me and my phone would ring, but I wouldn't be able to answer him. Goodness me! If I didn't pick up the phone, then somebody would have tried to search for me, wouldn't they? Yes, they would, of course they would! They would have tried to find me, but where would I have been by then? Where would that muddy water have taken me? I can't even swim! What would have saved me? Has anyone survived after falling into the Rioni? And there's a whirlpool just there, a real whirlpool! How many stones would it have knocked me against, where would it have spat me out? Wait, are there any stones at all on that side of the river?

O Lord, do you remember that girl? I do! It's been almost forty years and I still remember her, as if it were yesterday. Wait, what was her name? Lili, she was called. Lili, is that what they said? She was washed down from some place far upstream. She apparently fell into the Rioni while playing on the riverbank, and the black waves devoured her in a second. No one could do a thing. Golly, how terrible! Wasn't she spat out somewhere over there, by our copse? She was my age or perhaps a bit older. Goodness, how terrible! Some children from the next street found her. They even called me, and I even went to see her. Why on earth did I go? I think I was picking blackberries back then as well because my aunt Keto had kicked me out of the house. I can't remember. But what I do remember is the body of that poor girl. Her body, her legs, all covered in silt. Grey and lifeless. She was lying face down, that's how the river washed her up. You could see

her panties, with polka dots. They were sticking out from under her shredded dress, which had water weeds caught in it. Didn't she have a birth mark on her leg? It looked blue, but it must have been brown before, a beautiful birth mark. Goodness me, the state she was in! Poor, lifeless thing!

And I was completely terrified. Do you know why? Because her panties were visible, her underwear: ugh, so public! And how those boys from the lower street stared at her with both disgust and interest! Goodness me, poor thing, she even had sand and weeds in her hair. Didn't those boys say later, once the police arrived and turned her over, that her face was completely eaten away? I left before the police arrived, I ran away. I couldn't sleep that night, and if I did somehow manage to doze something would always wake me up, something would make me jump up in bed, oh my God! And if the Rioni washed me up on some riverbank, would I be like that girl, face down, all grey and covered in silt? Wait, what underwear am I wearing now? Is it clean? I can't remember what I'm wearing now—and what do you mean, 'is it clean?' Didn't I have a shower yesterday? Imagine being a grown woman, being washed up somewhere with your dress high above your waist! But don't I also have hairy armpits? Who notices hairy armpits on a dead person? And where would they have taken me? To that tiny morgue with its single room? But before I was taken there, wouldn't I have lain there on the riverbank? Someone passing by would have stopped, a child or a grown-up, and would have peered at me closely with disgust! Who would they call? The police? Those morons? The police would have taken me to the morgue, who else would have? Would that women from the morgue have said that Etero was a clean dead person? Wait! How would she have seen whether I was clean or not under all that silt, or what I was wearing, and what kind of underwear? And what I'd look like? My body would have swollen and turned blue! But what if some fish had eaten my face? And what would happen if I was never washed ashore and nobody ever found me? What if the bottom of the Rioni had become my grave? Would the water have polished my skull and my bones? Lord, save me! What crap are you thinking, you stupid woman? Look: you're alive, you survived! You're going home as if nothing had happened, you silly cow! A couple of thorns are stuck in your body, your dress is torn, your leg is grazed... but that's about it. Nothing worse, eh?

But you know what, I'm still curious. I 'd really like to know what they'd do? Who'd go to my house first? Neno? Tsisana? I didn't lock the door or shut the gate. They'd see my nicer pair of shoes there still and that I obviously didn't go to Terjola. Would they walk around the house? Oh

God, my room is such a mess! They'd poke their nosy heads in and see it all! They'd think that my legendary neatness and good housekeeping was a myth, wouldn't they? Well, I do keep the front room and the kitchen clean and tidy, but what about the back room, my room? They'd surely poke their heads in there as well! They'd nose around in the only room they were never allowed to see! Neno would, I'm sure. She is the nosiest. She always sticks her beak-like nose into everything, whatever takes her heart's fancy.

There, I'm already indoors, but why are my knees still shaking so much? First, I rub some vodka on my hand and my leg. God! It's so painful that I want to scream. I look at the clock, it's time to open the shop. He must come today! Go, Etero! Change your dress, act as if nothing has happened. Surely almost falling into the river shouldn't crush the spirits of a woman of your calibre! Come on, Etero, my beautiful girl! Put on something clean and go and sit in your shop as if you've never had a calmer day in your life! You know perfectly well that death hovers over the living like a dagger. You're no exception in God's eyes, are you? Of course not! Yes, death hovers there, but do I deserve to drown in the Rioni and be washed away? Tell me! And tell me, when have I cheated death? Wasn't it in Kutaisi when an electric coffee maker blew up at a friend's place? Or when my foot slipped on the branch of a cherry tree when I was small? Death was never more than a step away! But come on, enough! Enough is enough! You're still alive, aren't you? Come on, go and brush your hair! Look in the mirror. He's coming today, so look pretty! There, you see! Stop looking like a stuffed frog! There, well done! Just pluck those thorns out and you're ready! Good girl! Now off you go to the shop!

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As I unlock the door to my shop, my hands are shaking. I walk in and that smell hits me, just like every other morning, the smell of damp and washing powder. That's what those boxes of washing powder do. Wherever I put them, they smell and the smell fills the place. If I put them in the back room, it still stinks in the shop. When that man comes, I'll force him to put that rat poison powder of his in the back and I'll open that small door to air the place and blow the smell away. In the meantime, I'll find a cloth and wipe the windows. That's what I do every morning to keep things clean. I can hear the rumble of thunder in the distance. It will start to pour very soon. Right now,

I feel as if my head is empty, but my heart is still beating. And here he comes! Right on time! Right outside the door: *'I hope you are having a wonderful morning, Etero!'*

Now my heart is definitely racing. I almost died earlier today, but look at you, boy, enjoying life so much! There he stands laden with boxes of washing powder, his head barely visible behind them, his veins standing up in blue on his shovel-like arms. How can a small man like him have such huge hands? It looks as if they've been attached to the wrong body. His grey eyes are smiling at me through the boxes of powder: *'Here, look what I brought you!'*

As if he'd brought me some precious gift! *'Take them to the back room.'* I open the door for him as a really loud thunderclap almost deafens me. Now the August rains will begin, the sky will pour down. His shoulders jerk at the sound of the thunder but he pretends not to have been surprised, *'Don't throw them on the floor!'* I shout. *'And when did I ever throw them on the floor, girl?'* It's as if he's dancing, swinging his narrow shoulders with his boyish body. He's lean. But have you ever seen a man of his age with so much hair on his head? Everybody grows bald, even young men of his son's age, but he still has more hair on his head than three men put together. Gosh, he must have put on some cheap aftershave. He's even chewing gum, so early in the morning! I think he's flirting with me.

'Look how neatly I stack them for you' he says as he kneels to put the boxes of powder away tidily, like a child. He is stretching his thin neck, and he deftly moves his shovel-like hands. I am standing in the doorway, my hips wedged in the narrow passage, looking down at him. He resembles a bird, a bird of prey, but a kind, serene one. I can smell him despite the stench of the washing powder, I can smell his aftershave and his skin. I can smell his skin and I'm about to burst into tears. I can smell a human being! I can smell a human being, a man! Someone like me, who grew up without a mother, and only knows the smell of men. The smells of a father and a brother. *'How many boxes are there, boy?'* My voice has cracked. *'Thirty, I brought thirty as you told me, my dear!'* he smiles at me from below. *'Thirty? Didn't I tell you twenty?'* I say, trying to put some anger into my cracked voice. *'You told me thirty, Etero!'* He seems to be singing whereas I want to open my mouth and cry. I want to weep, goodness me! But isn't he still a stranger to me? How many times have I seen him? Not more than five or six, isn't it? But now he seems so familiar; this smell of his, mixed with the smell of washing powder, that it feels as if there are only the two of us in this world. I still want to cry. I want to wail 'I almost died half an hour ago, my boy, I almost fell into the Rioni, I

was almost swept away by the water, almost drowned, almost died. I really almost died and here you are, stacking these boxes of washing powder as if I hadn't been about to drown half an hour ago! Had it taken me, I would have drowned. Imagine if it had! And here you are playing with those boxes of poison like a child with wooden cubes in a kindergarten, stacking them as in a game!

Now you're going to turn around and tell me with a bright expression on your face *'Look, Etero, see how neatly I've stacked them!'* The tips of your ears are going a bit red, the way they do when you look at me. That's how you look, but don't look directly at me. You want to but don't dare. I want to hug you and tell you that I almost died earlier, boy, the black waters almost swallowed me, I almost drowned, I really almost drowned—and you turn around smiling, your ears red, I've never stood so close to you before, sensing the smell of your body even through the smell of that bitter chewing gum and the stinky aftershave, and I am moving towards it. *'Here, Etero'* you say, looking confused and a bit frightened, but I am already holding you. I can feel your lean, strong chest against my breasts. This slight man is the same height as me. I have my arms around him, *'I almost died earlier today, boy.'* Am I saying it? Or am I not? I don't know, since it feels so good to hug him! It feels so good to have him near my heart, and all of a sudden, the fear of disappearing disappears, the fear of drowning, of death...

There goes the thunder again, but I am no longer afraid of it either, the rain is pouring down on the roof, and I can barely hear that, too, I am hugging him, and his big hands are covering my back, and his hands are so hot. I become very hot between my legs as well, all I can feel is my cunt, I can't even feel my heart. His neck smells even more of him. The stinky stuff in his armpits, the smells of the chewing gum and cigarettes seem to have disappeared, and there, I can feel how he's reaching for me with his lips, he's no longer confused, and I can no longer breathe, I almost pour myself out onto his rough tongue. I can't even think of what I am doing, nor of how or why I'm doing it, it's as if I am in the twilight, I see everything and nothing at the same time, I can both remember and can't remember who am I, what I am, where I am. He doesn't waste any time, he's lifting my dress with his right hand, and, as if I knew his body by heart, as if I had been doing this every day of my life, I quickly pull off his t-shirt. It's not me, it's my body dictating what I must do, I am only a body right now—actually not a body, just my cunt. He's rubbing my breasts under my dress. He unclasps my bra, and that's when both of us let out a sort of howl. It's so hot between

my legs, I'm so hot, my entire body can feel how open my cunt is, I can feel his heat and mine, and, tearing myself away from his lips, I close the door with one hand, as if I am there and not there at the same time, as if it is me and not me, all at the same time. I take my dress off, and he's taking his trousers off so quickly that I almost lose sight of him, I can see the ribs on his spotty back, and the grey hair sticking out from his shoulders. I drop my bra, and '*Etero!*' he says again, moaning, his face brightening, as if it's the first time he has ever seen a woman's breasts, he's so joyful, as if he has never seen anything like them in his whole life, as if he wants to look at them at first, and then he comes with his mouth, and starts to lick them, first one and then the other, and when he moves from one to the other I can feel his saliva evaporating on my nipple, and when he moves back I feel the same on my other nipple, as if my body knows what's it doing, as if I've done it hundreds of times before. Then I move my hand towards his cock and its firmness and heat scare me, and make me tremble, but I am just my cunt, stuck with my back against those boxes of washing powder, and all of a sudden he finds me and comes into me with such strength as if he's been there before. He swings to and fro, as if he has found me with his entire body, and my whole body is both open and full. The thunder is almost crashing on our heads, the rain almost pouring down our necks, the ground giving way beneath us. I can't smell anything but the washing powder, while he moves, moans and breathes so strongly into my neck; my cunt only wants to hug him, and melt over him, I am so full, so alive, that nothing has any meaning anymore —neither death nor life, neither my grazed thighs nor the thorns in my fingers. I feel no pain as he continues to breathe heavily with his eyes closed, as if he's with me, only me, here with me. He's stuck to me and then between thrusts he stops suddenly with his eyes closed and collapses on me from above with his whole body and I can feel his cock in my cunt like my heart beats in my chest. It throbs and I squeeze it, still hard, and a groan rises from our stomachs to our lips.

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It was as if a century had passed, and somewhere in the distance is the rumble of another thunderclap, weaker this time, and I remember that the door, the other one, the front door, is wide open! It struck me like the thunder! '*The door is open, the door is open!*' We both feel we've been struck by lightning! He pulls up his underpants so quickly that I hardly notice. I finally manage to find my bra entangled in my dress which he had pulled over my head earlier. As he puts his trousers back on, I put my dress back on, as he puts his shoes back on, I struggle with my bra, and I can't

think of anything except the open front door! Nobody would have come in this downpour, but still! Go! Go, go! Quickly! His eyes were still watery, his hair tousled, the collar of his t-shirt tangled, but all this doesn't matter right now! Nothing matters, just as long as he leaves soon! *'I'll call you, Etero.'* It's as if he's trying to reach me, I don't know why, maybe to give me a kiss? But I stop him with my hand. *'Go! Now!'* *'I'll call you'* he says from the door, and all I can see is his back, he's running towards his van, and it's raining so heavily that his t-shirt is instantly soaked.

My knees are trembling again but this time differently. I close the door of the shop and lock it. There's no way anyone could have seen me! They would have seen his van and nothing else. I can hear him starting the engine. No, we didn't stay long, no more than ten minutes, at most. Goodness me, what have I done? My God! What happened? What's happened to me? My head and my body have switched off, I can't feel anything. No, I must sleep now and deal with everything later, I will arrange everything. I'll go home now, I must sleep! I'll reopen the shop later—what's the harm? I'll switch my phone off so no one can call me. Now you must sleep, Etero! I look at the boxes of washing powder, crushed, and strewn across the floor, I'll stack them later, how could I be bothered to do it now? All I need now is to sleep! But how could I have left that door open? What was I thinking? What if somebody had entered the shop and spied on us? I don't even want to think about it! How many times have you survived today, woman? Twice! Really, twice! No one would have gone to the shop so early in the morning, in such a downpour, surely? So, stop moaning! Go home now, woman! Have a nap, get some sleep, and you can worry yourself silly later when you wake up!

At home, I stagger towards the loo. I don't want to think! I don't want to think! I want my head to be filled with sawdust, my brain to stop churning so much! As I pee, I still feel the pleasure in my body, I am still numb. No, the only thing to do now is sleep on it. I will think about what to do and how to do it later, when I wake up. Before I flush the toilet, I stare amazed before my mind registers that my long-preserved virginity was nothing but foamy piss tainted with blood.

2.

First, four unknown children come clattering into the shop to demand a big bottle of shampoo. They're visiting relatives here, probably. The eldest pays for it and then all four of them want to

hold the bottle. They leave in even greater clamour, almost jumping on top of each other as they linger in the shop. Then Londa pops her tousled head in, *'Where were you, woman? I wanted a bar of soap.'* She pretends to have been worried, but she's just curious, no more than that. *'I wasn't feeling well, I had high blood pressure, I had to lie down.'* I play my part. *'So you've also got high blood pressure now?'* She's in a talkative mood. *'What do you mean, "now"? Isn't it the time for that?'* I'm not in the mood to talk. *'I wanted some soap, and in the end I had to buy some at the supermarket.'* She says slyly. *'Don't you need some washing powder? I just got some new boxes in.'* I continue to act out my role. If someone had noticed his van parked in front of the shop, I want them to know that he was there this morning and that I have nothing to hide, so that it doesn't look suspicious and won't lead to any gossip. *'I'll buy some later, I don't need any now.'* She leaves. I can't hide anything from them. It is better to let her know myself that I received a new delivery of washing powder. What I'm also saying, my dears, is that this is why that van was here this morning. The delivery driver came and brought washing powder.

The air is humid after the rain; it's like wearing damp clothes. I feel so weary I can't even sit down, but I am tottering slightly. I sit, and it starts to ache, somewhere inside, between my legs. And my grazed thighs also hurt. How easy it all turned out to be, Etero! How easy! An instant of pleasure! You yourself can't believe that it actually happened. But it did, as surety as you are now sitting here with a slightly painful throbbing in your groin. You don't want to feel that pain, either? I did pass a bit of blood, but later when peeing. But apparently that's how it is, you see? What else did Neno say? She was talking about that young gynaecologist, the one who was sent up into the mountains and was paid a little extra for going there, so people said. That's why he came to such a remote place. Apparently, he escaped from his wife, and eventually he escaped from here as well. He used to say that all the time. At least that's what Neno said. Apparently, he was forced to examine a new bride, brought from her wedding bed to prove her innocence. They say he was furious, what nonsense, some women are like this, and some are like that, he's supposed to have said. Some don't bleed and some don't even have a hymen at all, he told the mother-in-law of that poor bride. Neno told this story with great excitement and lots of laughter, but even then, my heart sank out of pity for that poor girl—and because I, a grown woman, knew nothing about hymens and blood. But how could I have known? As I grew up, I was only told fairy tales about hymens and men!

There, at last, Neno's story about the gynaecologist and her explanations have turned out to be useful! I almost begin to laugh, but from bitterness. I also seem to be like those women who don't bleed! Who only bleed a bit. Even in old age. But why didn't it hurt? Isn't that what I've been told all those years? That it will hurt like this, and that it will hurt like that, and that if it doesn't hurt then there's something abnormal... Well, all right, that's me. But when the moment came why didn't I think of bleeding or of pain? Pain and blood. I certainly didn't stop him! Not even for a moment! I greeted his lips with my lips, his body with my body, and his cock with my cunt. Could I have stopped him? But how could I when I was the one who made the first move? I did! I seduced him! My God, I wanted to feel human! I wanted to feel human, whatever it cost, and it worked!

So, what am I supposed to do now? Yes, I made the first move, but I just wanted to hug him, I wanted to calm him down, I wanted some affection, a chance to breathe. I wanted to hear him say 'How wonderful, Etero, that you didn't die! That you didn't drown, that you are alive, that you are with me, and that I am hugging you!' I didn't resist him, not for a second, but what shall I do now? I also wanted to be hugged. I wanted that even more! My body wanted it! And what can you do, when your body wants something? You can't stop it even if you try. And what did I do? Lord have mercy. Some shagger I was! I behaved as if I was so experienced! But the point is: how do I feel right now? I feel embarrassed, I want neither hugs, nor kisses, or for my head to be stroked, since it is so empty. I slept like a log for two hours, it felt as if I was surrounded by total darkness. I collapsed immediately as soon as I got home, but I got up later the way I went to bed, with a hollow head and a heavy body. I did wash here and there before leaving, but I didn't want to get rid of the smell of a man. I had an unusual smell on my body, his smell. On my body and there as well. It was a mixture of my smell and his, but his smell was stronger.

Some strangers come into the shop, it is summer and there are always new people around. They're all the same, I can't tell them apart, the men or the women who drag themselves here in the summer. They come in and even in this heat they speak arrogantly, they are so full of themselves, as if they were performing on stage, being watched by thousands of people. They look down on me as if it was my idle ancestor, not theirs, who rushed to Tbilisi to earn a living, like some useless locust; as if it wasn't them but me who came from that fruitless, talentless, good-for-nothing, obsequious, hypocritical background. Whereas my ancestors were hard-working, down-to-earth people who loved and respected their soil. My father, for example, kept digging till the very last

moment of his life. He died in his vegetable patch. Yet these people, these parasites, are still considered better. They rent a room in our remote, dead-end town, using borrowed money, and lazily amble over to the shop, buy something, putting a coin down on the counter as if they are doing you a favour. You're left wanting to strangle them.

But its so hot now that they look as if they're sleepwalking. They speak even more slowly. I feel the same, I am standing and stretching as well, I think I really have got high blood pressure. I am also so thirsty and in between the customers' talk I can hear my late aunt's voice ringing in my ears. For years my brain and ears have muted her voice: *'Don't you dare disgrace your family, girl! Don't forget that you have a father and a brother!'* But both my father and my brother are dead now, dear Aunt Ketevan! And so are you and have been for a while. I bet the maggots have eaten you by now, thank God! I am a grown-up woman, now everybody leave me alone! I'll take care of my own life. I'm still alive, and you are dead!

At the same time, I'm thinking there's nothing to worry about. Nothing. Really. Even if they saw him come into the shop this morning, he's just a delivery man. So what? Nothing special? And who would have seen him in that downpour, anyway? And even if they did, so what? And if they didn't see him, so much the better! He came in, didn't he? He came in and then he left! He didn't stay for long. And even if he dallied a bit, it was because of the rain, and he just stood over there, at the door, waiting. 'Have you got an umbrella?' he asked. 'Yes, I do, but I forgot it at home, I came to the shop before the rain began,' I told him. Yes, that's what I told him. So, he stood there, stood for a while, waited and waited, and since it didn't stop raining, he said he had to go. He was in a hurry, so he left. He had to go to a million shops after mine, and then he had to go to... Terjola! Yes, exactly! Terjola. Yes, it was raining... No, it was a real storm, it was raining buckets! No, there's nothing to worry about. Nothing. And there's nothing suspicious, either.

But, still, how many things can happen in one day? Near-death, and life as well! It really takes only one second, apparently! I can still almost hear the swoosh of the Rioni, I think my blood pressure is high. I'll go to Neno and ask her to measure it. Maybe I can hang on a bit longer, and then when I close the shop, I'll lie down and go to sleep. I'll sleep like the dead, and only then will I decide what to do and how. No, really, how did I manage to survive? That thorny bush saved me, and the root. Well done, girl! How on earth did you manage to lift a body like yours? Ninety kilos are no laughing matter! But life is sweet, and one would do anything for it. And what on earth

pushed me to gather those blackberries? Why, nothing—my brain didn't stop me from being so tempted by those blackberries that I paid no attention to the unstable ground or the drop, and almost ended up in the Rioni!

Haven't I been afraid of the Rioni all my life? Weren't we always scared of that black river? Didn't we always know we should never approach it, or else it would sweep the ground away from under our feet. Don't stare at it, or it will hypnotise you, will mesmerise you, and you'll fall in, you'll fall into the silty waves. It's as black as a whirlpool. It's only in November that it's no longer black. In sunny November, it's as green as an emerald. And then, it's also calm, as if some other river has replaced it. It looks so clean, then, as if half the country's sewage is no longer being poured down into it. It's so different in November. You want to stand and look at it, it's so welcoming. That's when it's no longer dangerous. It's beautiful, but aren't we all still afraid of it? Even a good swimmer is cautious, and who wants to swim in its muddy waters, anyway? Nobody swims in it, nobody jumps in it, not even to drown themselves. People hang themselves instead, that's the easiest way to commit suicide. It's only once in a blue moon that somebody falls in, like me, and then later people will talk of the washed-up body for two or three days and that will be it. 'What did the corpse look like? What colour was it? How eaten was it? We are all in God's hands, may the Mother of God protect every single one of us!' That's what people will talk about.

No, it was a miracle that I survived, goodness me! My Lord, or whoever you are up there, or whatever you are, and whenever you are, it was my luck, my good fortune! I could've been a corpse, the corpse of someone who fell into the water and was later found, but I wonder where? But, honestly, the things they've done to this little grove of trees. They've turned it into a desert and a collapsed riverbank. It is disappearing right in front of our eyes, the Rioni is eating it away, gnawing at it bit by bit, but is anybody doing anything about it? They just ignore it, and it'll be like that until the day the black river reaches their houses and carries off their children. The river taking the life of a lonely woman is nothing to worry about, is it? Not really. Nobody would shed a tear if you disappeared. What really matters to them is that their deflated balls are warm in their trousers or under their cassock, their stomachs are full, and they're driving cars like tanks, like maniacs, instead of walking a couple of steps in their cat-pee-sized town, leaving that heavy smell behind them in the air; the heavy smell that comes out of their car exhausts and their stomachs!

That's all very well, but how would you describe what I've done? What did I do? Wasn't it me who made the first move? I did. My body did. But I was always like that, I have always been like that, ever since I was a child. My body went in one direction and my head in another. What shall I do now? I have a tight feeling in my temples, and as I hand over some change to the stranger with lips like a fish, my phone goes 'beep' and I can see his number, and there's a message. The number ending in '99' is his number, my 'suitor'! Before fish lips leaves the shop, I look at the message. He has typed only two words: *'My Etero'*. What an idiot! How can men of his age be so simple-minded? But then, men can go 'gaga' at any age. Anyway, he's a man and he'll be fine, but what will I do? My temples tighten even more, but what shall I do now? No, really, how did I end up with this man, and this feeling of bewilderment?

I remember the first moment I saw him. He'd replaced his son. That's why I remember him. His son was a good boy, decent and thoughtful. Then he came. He came and I remembered him. Delivery drivers are mostly young men. Yes, very young and already married, already exhausted by problems at home on the one hand, up to their ears in debt and bank loans on the other, yet still young. Still frivolous, and a bit reckless. But his son was decent, not reckless at all. He was already sinking in debt. Otherwise, why would he have run away to Spain to work on a building site? And what's more he went there illegally, isn't that what they said? So, when he first came, he smiled at me and said he was replacing his son. And his ears turned red. They did look like each other, father, and son, both slim, lots of hair on their heads, and with hands like shovels.

The second time he came, he was looking at me and trying not to. Tsisana was with me at that moment, and she asked me who he was. I told her he was the new driver from my distributor. And she said, yes, he's the father of that boy, the one from Terjola, he's a grandfather and a very decent man, she said. 'You wretched woman, why did you have to tell me he's a grandfather?', I thought to myself. But after several visits I asked him if his son had managed to settle in Spain. I have no idea what made me start chatting since I had never spoken to him before. He said his son was fine, just fine, and smiled shyly and showed me a picture on his Nokia phone, the one with a torch, just like mine. It was picture of two boys, a very poor-quality photograph. But the hairy head and the prominent ears sticking out at the sides that they had inherited from their father and grandfather, were always obvious, even on a bad quality photo. 'These are my grandsons, twins, look at them, what boys!' he said. It was just a picture of two big-eared children with bulging eyes, but everybody

likes their own, and always think of them as the best. Those bulging eyes must have been inherited from the women, either their mother or grandmother, but that was none of my business. That was none of my business, right? None. He was showing me those little boys and my body was telling me that he just wanted to be closer to me, and that's why he was waving his phone in front of my nose.

When my body tells me something, that's the way it is. When my body tells me something, it always turns out to be true! But why didn't my body tell me anything when I went into that thorny bush on top of the cliff to collect some blackberries? But then it did tell me that at some point our bodies would rush towards each other, didn't it? Didn't it help me find his body, immediately, right there and then? Who said that old men can't do it any more? But wait, why is he old? What did he tell me once? How old is he? He said he's fifty-five. A fifty-five-year-old man can't be considered old, can he? Even if he has grandchildren, he's still not old. If a man in his fifties is elderly, then so am I. That's what it means. But I've kept my looks, why would I be old? I have had neither a husband nor a child to age me, so why would I not look good? But he hasn't kept his looks. He has wrinkles on his face, around his eyes. But because he has so much hair, it gives him that boyish look. Being slim also helps. Had he been bald and fat, things would have been different, no? No, he's not old and neither am I, but we are forced to feel old. Everybody's old in this country after twenty. But it's not like that, it's about your heart. The main thing is your heart. He has a good heart, he's not a bad man. What would he do if I'd drowned in the Rioni? He would have come to my closed-up shop, and someone would have told him that Etero has drowned, carried off by the Rioni. His heart would have shrivelled, it would have sunk. But why does my heart sink as well? He looks so radiant when he comes into the shop, his face lights up with a shining smile. Instead of soap and washing powder, you'd think he was bringing gold, rubies, and pearls. And he's always very happy to see me, isn't he? I'm also happy to see him, but I never show it, why should it show, why should I give him any sign?

Now, what springs to my mind is how he was licking my breasts. No! How could all this happen, how could I do all that? How could I trust this total stranger? What made me want him so much? And why now? And what about that drill Tsisana's foul-mouthed husband claimed I, and women like me, spinsters, and old maids, would need to do the job. And other rude, impotent men around him apparently began to laugh? Well, obviously no drill was needed at all, see? You see, don't

you? Who needed a drill? He slid in and out so easily, I didn't feel anything, no pain at all. I felt good, nothing else. Yes, all right, it does hurt a bit inside, and my temples are pulsating a bit, I have high blood pressure, that's it, but no other pain, see? Don't they say that after forty there's no life and no screwing? Is that true after all? I feel like that old woman in the proverb who learnt to play the harp while salive so that she could play it later in heaven! That's how all this feels, and if I don't go to Neno now to check my blood pressure, all this will have been in vain, cocks and harps included!

I'm about to close the shop when Natela from the other village comes in. She's a real child of the devil, as annoying as a virus, with all the devils gathered in her eyes. This bloody woman pretends to want to buy something. She works her way through the shelves, touching a bottle of hair dye here and a razor there—and, out of blue, she asks slyly: *'Did you manage to make that blackberry jam in the end, woman?'*

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