

Home – Him

by Ekaterine Togonidze

excerpt

People are divided into those who
have been through the war and
those who haven't. And there are
those who are somewhere in between,
on the bridges of war and peace –
the time swings.

The ceiling. Your peaceful breathing. We had wallpaper on the ceiling of our bedroom. Maybe I should go and pull it down because I can't get a similar one. I could bring it here and cover the ceiling, then you might feel more at home... This is our home too, Gabi! But what's the use, you don't open your eyes anyway. I want to cry. I smile. When I look at you for a long time and then up at the empty ceiling, my visual memory can discern your beautiful features, precious outlines. You are everywhere. At times I'm frustrated at how much you look like Demna, especially with your eyes closed. When you open your eyes – when and if that happens – you look like me. They are light green, just like mine. Or rather sea-colour. The sea is Demna's too – he was raised by the sea. I used to go to the sea, but only as a summer visitor. Neither have I been to Demna's sea... It's all quiet. I count the waves of your breathing, follow them. Breathe in together with you, breathe out together with you. In the end, it's the only sound you talk to me in, tell me that you're alive and promise you'll once wake up. You do promise, don't you? When that sound isn't enough, I put my head to your

chest and your heartbeat fills me. That's how I calm down. Being calm is essential. Fear is an enemy. I think I've learnt to fear calmly. To live alongside the enemy. Now, I breathe calmly, just like you. I move without haste, not to make any mistakes. I can't miss anything – medicine, time, exercise, time, feeding, time, controlling every vital parameter at the right time. I talk cheerfully, as far as I can. That's my role, the main role in life that I play. Actually, I'm scared. I fear every day that passes because you've been asleep for one hundred and eighty-four days, completely motionless, getting slacker day by day. Your body is too soft. Your muscles seem deflated. Your reflexes are too weak. Gabriella, wake up!

Nia abruptly turns to the right, to the child. She throws a worried glance at her as if astonished, astonished again that she is still unable to clutch her daughter from the claws of the lethargic sleep. The girl's eyes are closed, her head turned towards her. Where else would it be if Nia put her like that? Her mouth is slightly gaping, with a tube running from her nose taped to her cheek. The ten-year old girl's curly black hair drops from her forehead. She looks like a fresco, a saint. And behaves like a saint. What wrong can she do in such a motionless state anyway? Or what wrong did she do earlier? Two teardrops roll down Nia's left cheek and get lost in the pillow. Then she speaks with a smile, with forced cheerfulness:

'Good morning, my dear. It's Monday, 22 October, Gabriella.' She looks at her phone and her voice steadies. 'It's eight o'clock and 18 degrees outside. I'll turn on the heating.' She gets up. 'Now Mum will brush her teeth, take a shower and tend to you. But first, let's change your position. In the night I woke up only once to turn you over, but it's advisable to do it every two hours,' she mutters and turns the girl to the right.

She kisses the girl's face. Goes to the bathroom. Returns with wet hair. She throws the towel on a chair and, naked, looks for her clothes. In her panties and a T-shirt, she studies her thin body in the mirror. Her gaze focuses on her sunken eyes, then she applies some cream. She then ties her

hair and pulls on sports pants. She goes out of the room speaking, leaving the door open.

‘Nia has already showered. I’ll bathe you in the evening, no sense doing it earlier. Zura will come for the massage and grease you with his creams. Do you like Zura? He’s a good lad, isn’t he? Better than that woman. The room will be warmer by then, so you won’t feel cold after the bath. Today Mum has got to leave for some time.’

When she returns, she puts the girl on her back and begins to massage her feet.

‘One-two, one-two.’ The girl’s relaxed feet are a bit longer than Nia’s hands, easily submitting to her movements, upwards and downwards, being as soft as modelling clay.

Nia moves to the girl’s knees, flexes her joints and then does the same to her arms.

‘Wish me luck, my girl. I haven’t acted for so long.’ Nia moves the girl’s arms in circles. ‘One-two, one-two.’

In fact, I’m always acting, Gabriella. Do you think it’s me you see? I first died when I saw you in the intensive care with all those tubes and attached to those monitors. The second time when I saw the footage of you carried out of the house. I hate your dad, despise him with all my heart, but I can’t tell you that. Those are the words written by someone else, a cold-hearted script-writer or an evil director. And I repeat them as if I’ve learnt them by heart. Every day I tell you what day it is, what time it is, that everything is fine... What is fine? I think something else, but say something different. I want to cry, but I smile.

‘They haven’t given me the lines, so I’ve got no idea what I’m supposed to be, of what age... They’ll tell me there and then. I’ll try not to feel so tense. I need to free my inner self, I need to put an effort. I won’t take the sedative today. No harm in that.’ Suddenly she remembers she mustn’t pass her worries onto the girl and adds quickly, ‘Everything’s going to be fine.’

Nia wraps Gabriella in the blanket, tunes on to some music on the radio and goes to the kitchen. She laughs. As she switches on the blender, she laughs even louder, but it's hard to say whether it's laughter or crying.

How can you laugh when you don't feel like it? Can I cry anyway? What do I hope for? I can't do anything. Who's going to give me that part?

Nia drops half a banana and peeled apple in the blender and continues to practise laughing, forceful, desperate laughter: Ha, ha, ha!

'Today it's buckwheat with fruit. It's yummy!' Nia puts a little bowl on the bedside table and a cup of coffee next to it.

The cup is steaming. The well-blended porridge is in the bowl. She turns down the radio and fills the feeding syringe with the glutinous liquid. Then she sterilizes the tube.

Gabi, I detest breakfast. Today I won't take the pill and won't eat anything. You used to hate porridge. When I tried what was offered as tube feeding, I nearly puked. My version is much better, though you can't taste anyway, so it really doesn't matter...

'Tomorrow you'll have some tests, Gabi, so please be a good girl, make your mum happy. Remember, you had to get your hemoglobin and D-vitamin levels right? They were too low. Please promise this time they'll be all right.'

The tube slowly fills with the warm porridge, flowing through Gabriella's nose down to her stomach.

'Today we've got a video chat with Professor Eiger. What shall I tell him new about you? When I put some ice to your stomach, your blood pressure hasn't risen since. Neither there are any changes during the massage. Your pulse quickens a little, and that's that.' Nia sighs and sips her coffee. At the same time she carefully pushes the feeding syringe, very gently. 'And you're such a good girl! You've put on a whole kilo in the last three months. Your digestion is fine too, no high fever... What else? Your complexion is wonderful, my pink peach girl! My Sleeping Beauty, my darling girl...'

Nia looks at the girl lovingly and strokes her hair with her free hand.

Professor Eiger tells me that the correct answer to my question whether I should have a New Year tree is 'Yes'. They start their Christmas preparations in November... So what if the girl can't see the tree? What if she wakes up exactly at the right time? He supports me with his gentle optimism. Even if it doesn't happen, a child needs a festive mood at home, complete with flavours and smells and decorations that are associated with the period and created through traditions and usual preparations. He says it's the sense of home and stability, and of existing in time... Professor believes I should get you a present too...

The ringing of the phone makes Nia jump.

'Yes, it's me. At one o'clock? Are you sure? I was told it'd be evening... Oh... Can it be later? Every hour is important to me... Yes, sure, that's equally important... But we had agreed to something else... Oh, no, I'll be there. Yes, I understand. I'll be there at one o'clock.'

Instead of checking the time, agitated Nia looks at the feeding syringe, which is only half empty.

Damn you! You don't care for anyone or anything! Now what the hell do I do? Don't even think about an acting career, Gabriella. Can you please believe me in that, my stubborn girl?

Nia looks at Gabi's paintings on the wall, some colourful fishes, and the photos of herself and Gabi where Demna is either not there or is skilfully cut out. Pensively, she rubs her forehead and pushes the feeding syringe a bit harder. She is looking for a number on her mobile and dials it.

'Tamuna, can you please come at twelve today? Yes, I know, but my plans have changed... I could let you go earlier... You can't? All right, I understand.'

Silence. Nia fills the empty syringe with the porridge and phones her mother.

'Mum, please help... I know, but I've got to go and Tamuna will come at five. If you could stay till then...'

And all the while she is studying the girl's face. Gabriella's cheeks are rosy and her breathing gets tense. Nia uncovers her and checks her nappy.

Then she turns her phone on loud mode, puts it on the table and sets to changing the nappy.

‘Where are you going, Nia?’ a woman’s displeased voice can be heard.

‘Casting, Mum. They changed the time, so I’ve got to go.’ Nia wipes the girl with a wet tissue and then applies a special foam.

‘Oh, Nia, aren’t you fed up with that nonsense? For how long? Aren’t you tired of that hassle? Extras, episodic roles... Is that why you studied for so long? Isn’t your Dad’s example enough? He’s drinking, still waiting for his role.’ The mother laughs bitterly. ‘I’m exhausted, do you get it? It can’t go on like this. I’ll help you, Nia, however I can but you’ve got to start a normal life... Larisa offers a job in her company. Maybe you could use your knowledge of languages...’

Nia listens patiently and dries the girl with great care. She adjusts a new nappy, then drinks her coffee in one gulp and takes her phone.

‘Mum, this isn’t a small part. Please, don’t upset me. I’ve got to go. Please be here at half past twelve.’

Nia is looking at her feet. Her black tennis shoes flicker so fast, she might be running. The lace got untied on one of them, jumping this and that way. But she doesn’t stop to fasten it, just watches it, as if it’s part of a game – she mustn’t step on it and mustn’t trip...

What if I get that part, Gabi? What’s gonna happen to you? Who’s gonna take proper care of you? Tamuna is a good woman but the other day you had your foot sticking out from under the blanket and it was very cold. I asked her to keep record of your blood pressure, but instead of every two hours, she measured it in three-hour intervals. She gave you the soup so fast, you had hiccups for ten minutes. However, she enjoys taking you out, even when it’s cold. Sometimes I watch you from the balcony and she is very tender, though she doesn’t know I’m looking. But still, she’s not the family... What else can I demand from her anyway? Even my Mum can’t do more.

She can't bear it anymore. I'd rather die than ask her for more money. When I sold the car, I opened a deposit in your name, but spent the rest. A bathing chair, a pram, a caretaker, an inhaler, medicine, feeding tubes, hundreds of smaller and bigger things we've never needed before... But don't you worry, Gabi, you'll have everything you need! For one, you don't need shoes at the moment... I wish you did... Your dresses are hanging in the wardrobe, just like museum pieces. Had this flat been rented out, we'd be better off... On the other hand, if the tenants hadn't moved out of their own accord, where would we be now? The Mayor's office gave a miserable sum that I gave to your dad to keep him out of the street like a stray dog. When are they going to strengthen that damned house? It's their priority if you ask them, but it's already a year and nothing is done. Demna was enquiring about it, as Mum told me... I find it hard to even mention your dad's name. Why I failed to see from the very beginning that he was going to destroy my life? How could I convince myself he was a good man? Attentive and loyal... When meeting someone, why doesn't our intuition tell us to keep away from them? How come no inner voice warned me? Why did I meet him anyway, why the hell did I fall for him? Sorry, Gabi, but I hate your dad. He betrayed us. Abandoned us to perish. Professor Eiger forbids me to say such things to you. I know – if not for him, you wouldn't be, but because he is, you're not more! God help me... Touch wood, you're still with me. You are, but...

Sorry, Gabi, that I've left for the casting. Mum was already on her way, so what can happen to you in half an hour? Should I go back? What are you doing? Sleeping, what else. Still sleeping. Sleeping. Do you dream at all? Will you ever tell me what was going on during the time that didn't pass? You're my life, my girl. I might find a job. Please help me. It's my profession. I wonder what the part is. Who else is invited or how many contenders are there? One serious role is followed by others. But I failed to get the one that makes you memorable for the public and makes things easier ever after. This director won't shoot a bad film, he's got the taste and skill... I need money. But what do I do with you? Ah, don't worry, I won't get the part anyway. No need to be upset. Sometimes I'm too pretty, at times not

enough. Sometimes I'm too young, at times too old. Can I for once be what they're looking for? I'm late. My hands are frozen and sweaty. What's wrong with me? Gabi, you do believe I left you not to have fun? At least you believe I don't enjoy these casting sessions, don't you? Do you by any chance think I'm tired of you? Deep down in your heart, do you think I'm exhausted because of everything? Do you really think like that? Can you be right? Yes, I'm tired. Oh God, what nonsense! What's wrong with me? I had to take my pill!

'So, you're here. Please wait here.' The director's assistant recognizes her from the photo.

'Yes,' Nia smiles politely and takes a seat next to two young women.

I ran for nothing. These are before me. I know this one. She's quite good, but seems the same in every part, a bit stilted though. Who's the other one? I wonder where the toilet is. Nia ties her shoelace so tightly as if intending to never untie it.

There is an overfilled ashtray on a little table. Nia takes out her cigarettes. Her hand is shaking and she doesn't want anyone to notice it. She lights one very quickly, slips her free hand between her knees and smokes nervously. Her mouth dry, she glances at the room. The silence is awkward. Then the door opens and a young woman in a short dress walks out briskly. She throws a look at the waiting girls and nods coldly. Nia also nods.

Nino... What role does she have? Gabriella, Mum's very nervous. Who's gonna have me? Nino is seven or eight years older than me, but can play someone younger if she wishes. She's very good. You and I once saw her in a play and you liked her. She's a real professional. It's not just her luck, she's truly talented. She's, what one would say, a born actress.

'Excuse me, can you tell me where the bathroom is?' Nia crushes her cigarette and looks at the waiting girls.

'Over there,' one of them nods towards the bathroom.

Nia washes her sweaty hands very carefully, just like doctors taught her. Suddenly she hears voices from the adjacent room.

‘Who’s next? How awful she looks!’ a male says.

Nia turns off the tap with her soapy hand and listens attentively.

‘Yes, must be that extra weight or something else... A fat cow. Two Rustaveli Theatre actresses are waiting and that pretty one, very attractive. She’s a bit apathetic, but it’s for you to decide.’

Nia hardly breathes.

‘Remind me, where does she play?’

‘You won’t remember. Was in the theatre, then had small parts in our series...’

‘Fine. Put her among the new faces, Leka.’

‘Yes, Kote. Her husband is a refugee.’

‘What about her?’

‘Not her, but the story is kind of familiar to her. Her husband is from Sokhumi, and what’s more, her daughter...’

‘I got it. Make her wait while we have a video conference with the French. Leka, give me the earphones. And you can have a break.’

What has Demna got to do with it? He’s not my husband anymore! It’s none of your business whose wife I am!

Covered in foam, Nia’s fingers stick out in the air. Highly irritated, she turns on the tap and washes her hands in a frenzy. Then dries them with a paper towel. As she leaves the bathroom, she bumps into the casting manager.

‘Oh, hi. I was surprised not to see you. I knew you had come.’

‘Hello. What’s the film about?’ Nia asks abruptly.

The girls glance towards them. The casting manager looks a little surprised, as if insulted by the question, but smiles politely and points at the bench.

‘Please wait and we’ll call you.’

Nia doesn’t move.

‘It’s about Abkhazia,’ the manager adds and turns her back on Nia. She turns after a couple of steps and orders, ‘Let your hair loose.’

Nia is baffled. Then she awkwardly unclasps her hair clip. Her moist straw-coloured hair drops down to her breast.

‘That’s better,’ the casting manager says sternly and walks away.

Gabi, before it’s my turn, I’ll be completely undone. Why I didn’t think of putting the damn pill in the bag? Mum must have come already. If I call, she’s gonna upset me even more. She’s there, of course. Oh my! Professor Eiger! I was to call him five minutes ago... Damn, it’s their fault! I’ll send him a message. Such a shame... Won’t be able to talk to me till next Monday... Talking to him always calms me, such a cute old man, so experienced and reliable...

‘You’re Tia, right?’

‘Nia,’ the assistant quietly corrects the director.

‘Nia, Mia, Ia,’ the director shakes his head and rummages through the applications with photos on the table. ‘How old are you?’

‘Thirty-three.’ Nia feels lost facing the director, the cameraman and the assistant.

‘Oh, have you started already? I’m sorry,’ the casting manager whispers and sits at a long table together with the others.

‘Tell us about yourself. You’re from Abkhazia, right?’ The director glances at Leka, who nods and begins to take pictures.

‘Me? I’m not...’

‘Didn’t you say she was a refugee?’ The director asks the casting manager.

‘Her husband. I’ll tell you later,’ she whispers back.

‘Please show your profile. Keep talking, we’re listening,’ the director speaks very fast.

Listening, ha? My name is Nia, neither Mia nor Ia. I'm not a refugee and I don't have a husband anymore. What does it matter anyway? I've been waiting for an hour and a half, so tell me what the hell you want me to do. I either do it or not, and then I can go. My daughter's waiting. I've told you my age. You also know I'm not a star. I'm 169 cm tall and weigh 56 kilos. I've played doubles for the prima actresses of the same build. My dad's a loser. Must have started drinking waiting for the kinds of you to call him. I don't even know if I want this part. What's it anyway? I might not agree at all. It's not only for you to decide everything... I've got a daughter who is silent. She's sleeping but will surely wake up. It's her father's fault. I should've fallen asleep instead of Gabriella. Only kids can do that. Close their eyes and draw the curtains. Put out the lights on the stage and announce an unlimited interval. Then hide in the back-stage and wait till it's worth continuing to act at all. It's often called the fear of exclusion, but is translated as a submissive syndrome, which is absolutely wrong. Gabriella is anything but submissive. She's the most stubborn girl I've seen. She preferred giving up rather than losing in a game. And if that's submissiveness, she's subjugated me, the time and stopped everything else around her.

'Are you nervous by chance? Who was your tutor at the University?' The casting manager checks the time, worried that her protégée has failed to meet the expectations.

'Tvildiani. What should I speak about? What interests...'

'Doesn't matter, just talk,' the director interrupts her.

'Doesn't matter?'

'Right, just talk without stopping and pack that bag.'

There is a canvas bag in the corner of the room. Nia goes over and begins packing imaginary things into it.

'Good morning, my dear. It's Monday, 22 October, eight o'clock. The sun is shining but it's a bit cold. I'll turn on the heating and get the breakfast ready. Today I felt in the air that New Year is coming soon.' Nia pretends she is carrying various items from around the room, even gets things down from imaginary shelves or out of drawers. 'What if we celebrate New Year

in our home? You want that most of all, don't you? To return home... The wall has such a crack that you can see the sky.'

'Was your house in Sokhumi?' the director asks.

'What house?' Nia asks.

Lost in his thoughts, the man doesn't reply, instead he says:

'Now run.'

Nia looks around. The room isn't that big. Instead of running around in the limited space, she suddenly rushes towards the long table and circles it twice, very fast. Everyone stirs and the director rises to his feet.

'Let's go over there,' he says and leaves the room, followed by the others.

The cameraman whispers to him in the hall:

'It's OK with me,' and shows the footage taken by a special programme on his mobile. 'Great potential. But it's for you to decide. If that's all for today, I'll go back to the studio. Jaga's boys are waiting for me.'

'That's it for today. Lulu's agent demanded such royalty, to hell with them,' the director chuckles.

'Yeah, I know. I'm not crazy about the girl anyway, she's the same everywhere... OK, I'm off and see you on the site.'

The casting manager lets Nia pass in the hall and instructs her secretly:

'Free yourself! It's a decisive role. You're thirty-fourth and there are others waiting... You've got to fight for the part, you never know...'

They walk into a spacious sunlit room. Nia's heart is beating madly. She hasn't run for a long time. Hasn't been without her pill for the last four months. One can't stop taking it all of a sudden. It has to be done gradually, cutting on the anti-depressant and learning to keep her internal balance...

'You walk into the room and see your husband with a woman. Your loyal husband... with another woman. He cheated on you,' the director smiles at Nia.

Taken aback, Nia freezes. She thinks for a second and chuckles. Demna? Demna with a woman? In that rented hole he got for the compensation thrown by the Mayor's office?

With a derisive expression, Nia slowly walks to the chair in middle of the room. The commission members sit on a corner sofa. The assistant is filming Nia on a mobile phone.

Nia is looking at the chair, imagining Demna. In fact, she prefers not to see him at all, but that's what is needed now. Your husband has cheated on you, he said, but she had only one. Demna. That's why she sees Demna with a woman in his lap. Nia studies the chair and circles it very slowly. She remembers that only chair she found in Machabeli Street when she moved in with Demna. There was one single chair, a bed, a little table and Demna's grandpa's drum. The instrument – with a rare wooden carcass and several pairs of sticks – was respectfully placed in the corner, as a family heirloom. His grandpa was a drummer and when the war began he was touring Tbilisi, but left the drum in the Conservatoire and returned to Sokhumi. Nia thought Demna couldn't play it, but later learnt from his aunt that he was exceptionally gifted from his childhood and even played alongside professional musicians since he was ten. He didn't touch the drum after the war though. He treated grandpa's instrument like a relic, only touching it when it needed dusting. Before they bought some furniture, Nia and Demna took turns sitting on that only chair. More than often together.

Nia's imagination runs away with her and she sees herself on Demna's knees. Completely entwined. She feels the pressure of his warm hands, his tongue sliding between her breasts. She shivers. More from disgust than anything else. Red patches appear on her chest, visible because of her low-cut black top.

'Girl, you're not in a museum looking at some sculptures,' the casting manager loses her patience, her tone showing support. 'Come on, do it!' she adds more strictly.

The director is watching with his arms crossed. He seems to have lost interest in Nia, but the red blotches on her skin hold his gaze. He squints and tells the assistant:

‘Get a close shot.’

Leka rises and stands closer to Nia.

‘Your husband has cheated on you, Nia. You walk into the room and see him with another woman. In your home! Do you get it?’ the casting manager tries to rekindle her emotions.

‘Yes,’ Nia reacts absent-mindedly in an attempt to get control of herself. She looks at Leka who is filming.

She brushes her chest with revulsion, as if trying to wipe away Demna’s saliva.

‘Come on, be attentive, we haven’t got all the time in the world.’ The casting manager claps loudly, ‘Go!’

Nia takes a few steps back, breathes deeply and walks into the imaginary shooting frame from the depths of the room. The chair. What the hell? It really looks like the one they had on Machabeli Street... Demna is sitting on it. Her imagination pictures a dark-haired girl who has wrapped herself around him like a serpent. Nia stares at her terrified. Who’s she?

Gabriella, I don’t believe having such a dad is better than not having one at all. Professor Eiger tells me the child’s interests come first. I must put aside my emotions and if anti-depressants don’t work, I should see a psychologist, get rid of them there. My calmness is the main remedy for your healing. As if you’re still attached to my umbilical cord and I can’t hide anything from you. Whatever I eat or drink flows into you, feeds you, either helping or harming you. As if you’re back to being a new-born. As helpless and dependent... My precious girl, please forgive me if I’m doing something wrong, but I refuse to believe you need a dad who abandoned you. How can I let him see you again? I stopped talking to Mum for two weeks when she allowed it. My heart aches even now when I remember it... I came home earlier and what do I see? They let Tamuna go. Ira is massaging you and,

my biggest mistake, your biological father is standing by your bed! I couldn't believe my eyes! Together with Ira, he was holding your little foot and... It makes me vomit when I remember it! I'm also sure it wasn't the only time, he must've been allowed to see you before. I had left home only several times in those months and they must've betrayed me every single time. Has your condition deteriorated since then? Gabi, your dad was there, 'helping' the masseur, looking into her eyes, joking with her – and they were laughing! Do you get it? They were laughing at us! This inhuman creature thought it was funny! Instead of taking his own life... There he was, flirting with Ira right by your side, exuding testosterone, chatting her up with his bloody self-confidence.

Nia is standing facing the commission, looking at the empty chair, her eyes getting wider and wider due to her own visualization. Who's that? Is it the masseur? Wait a minute, the cracked house was repaired, the Machabeli Street house was restored and Demna dared bring her there? And sat down on our chair and... Suddenly, Nia kicks the real chair. She jumps at the noise and tears flow down her cheeks. Leka gets even closer to film her.

Gabi, do you understand now why I had to let Ira go? I know how important stability is to you. Those you get used to mustn't disappear suddenly, but how could I keep her? When she was leaving she said she knew my husband before but when she failed to recognise him, he reminded her of himself. That's what she said they were talking about, not laughing... They were, whatever they say! Said Tamuna left herself, they didn't ask her to leave. She said 'we', including Demna and herself! Tamuna was in a hurry and asked to be relieved if they didn't need her anymore. So, they decided she wasn't needed. Apparently, she was an unwanted witness. To hell with them! I hope your dad won't have any other children to ruin their lives. Otherwise, he can have his beastly fun if he wishes! Let him discard his disgusting passion in a condom! He can be with whoever he wants and

whenever he wants! I don't give a damn! But he must leave us alone. He abandoned us, didn't he? So he must forget all about us!

Nia stands frozen, but is about to burst from within. She trembles. She turns, walks away and bangs the imaginary door.

'Is that all? Is that all you can do?' the casting manager jumps up in frustration.

Nia wipes her tears and turns to face the commission. She is flushed.

'Will you leave them like that? Give up so easily? Yes, you are indignant, but you act like a sulking woman. You must be furious! Do you know what fury is?'

The director also gets to his feet, goes over to the fallen chair and puts it up. Lost in thought, he stares at Nia.

'She moves very well,' he tells the casting manager as if Nia isn't there. He returns to his seat, but remains standing. As if waiting for more action.

'Listen, Nia,' the casting manager begins, 'it's your home, and the husband's yours too.' She seems to challenge Nia. 'Where do you think you're going? Why do you look so scared?'

Tearful, Nia is at the wall, glued to it as if waiting for a firing squad to shoot her.

'You know how it feels when the most precious things are taken away from you. Don't bottle up those feelings. Let them out,' the casting manager adds forcefully.

Silence. Nia's loud breathing can be heard in the room, together with the muffled noise of a nearby construction works.

'Now turn and when you're ready, we'll begin,' the woman says sternly.

Obediently, Nia turns and hears the director's strict voice from behind:

'You love the man. You love him.'

Demna, the light of your eyes... They haven't vanished with Gabi's accident. Remember how they affected me when we met? Always affected... Drove me crazy. Your face, before you fall in love, is something, and the eyes that glow with love. You seem to cast a fisherman's net, which I believe is impossible not be caught in. You're a skilled liar, deceiving everyone, and in truth you're the greatest actor. I've got no idea how you do it – casting that gaze from somewhere within, a devastating look. You know exactly how to look at a woman, so that it's not just passion, but something much more important, more thrilling, electrifying and permanent! Warmth, reliability, calmness, consistency, loyalty and a promise that everything will be fine. Indeed, with that clever look of yours you can convince anyone that it is meant only for her, that second is only hers, that you're going to look only at her, nobody else because she is the only one for you. It's wicked, Demna... You've got no scruples...

It was that deceptive look you had in the intensive care. Know what look you had for Gabi? The same when you saw her for the first time in the maternity ward. Your eyes were full of love, ready to sacrifice yourself. That horrible day I was out working and then saw you in the hospital. Initially, they stopped me, saying no visitors were allowed, especially two. I argued with the guards, rushed to the ward and saw you kneeling at her bed. It seemed you could give your life without a second thought for her to get better. Actually, you had left her helpless just forty-five minutes before, but was still shamelessly holding her little hand. When I saw both of you, I nearly felt for you more, really took pity of you. And all the while, you had been lying all day. I learnt the truth the following day, but not from you, from the TV. My God, how I hate you, Demna! My God, how I loved you!

Nia stops at the imaginary door.

What if... Nia's imagination invents a new version: Maybe the old house in Machabeli Street wasn't restored, no, it must've happened earlier, when things were all right, before everything collapsed in our life. Wasn't that what the woman said? That they knew each other before? When would

that be? How well did they know each other? I've always thought there was some other explanation for all this. Such things don't happen for nothing... So, where did you go, Demna? Who were you off to see that day?

At the imaginary door, Nia is listening intently to the imaginary breathing of the couple behind it. Then she steps in and sees imaginary Demna. Yes, nothing has happened – Gabriella is fine, still at school. What if Nia hadn't returned home? But the shooting was cancelled because of the bad weather. So, she comes home earlier and what does she see? Demna is sitting on their chair. Ira is on his knees, kissing and looking at him lovingly. She seems to melt in his arms. She undresses. Demna never closed his eyes while lovemaking and now too, they are open. I've got no idea how the sea can flow from those black eyes. The bottom is clear, calm, light blue. I've never seen that dream beach. Have you taken your share of the Black Sea or what kind of gaze is that? You don't look like any of my friends, no one else for that matter. Could it be that you were born there? If one is looking at the horizon since childhood, does one's eyes become deeper? And who's swimming in the sea of those eyes now? Couldn't you refrain from betraying me so completely? If you couldn't wait to screw her, why give her the same look as you gave me?

Nia noiselessly approaches the chair, like a wild beast with ruffled fur. Her breathing quickens, her eyes are bloodshot. She is looking at an empty chair and sees the true reason of her misfortune – her husband who, in reality, ran away much earlier.

Yes, that's my profession. I look at a chair and see Demna. I look at Demna and see a woman on him. That's what acting is all about – everything is make-believe... But could this make-believe be more real than the reality? Can cheating start like that, turning one into a beast and making you forget your own child?

'Get out!' Nia's muffled voice says.

Covering her breast with her hands, Ira quickly steps over Demna, who hastily zips his trousers. Nia's imagination sees Ira's patent leather handbag on the floor and kicks it with all her might, sending it flying through the open door. Ira runs after it and out of the room. Nia and Demna remain facing each other. The chair is between them.

Nia's eyes glow so brightly on Leka's phone that they look deep green.

'Don't lose the rhythm! Act! Shout!' the casting manager can't keep quiet. 'Throw her clothes out of the window! The slut deserves it!'

Nia doesn't seem to hear anything. Her heart beats frantically, right in her throat. Her veins strained, her muscles tensed, her ears stifled. Her lips are so tight, she seems to be fighting an urge to vomit. She steps towards imaginary Demna, and he steps back. One more step and her foot meets the leg of the chair. Very slowly, Nia gets hold of its back. As if using it to steady herself, the wooden grate works as a cage holding her within the enclosure, keeping her from pouncing on her victim like a furious hyena.

'Is that why you ran away?' a hoarse voice escapes her throat.

Leka, who stands closest to Nia, is taken aback. Someone else seems to be talking through Nia. The director and the casting manager have leant forward, as if everyone has united against Demna. Then they jump at the sound as Nia throws the chair onto the floor with all her might. She looks around and very clearly sees Demna's grandpa's drum in the empty room. Her next blow is intended for it.

It's what your grandpa left you, right? You cared for it, didn't you? It's your family heirloom that Gabi and I were forbidden to touch. It's the most precious thing for you, isn't it? And your computer with its hard drives that you salvaged from the house when you felt the imminent danger. Poor you, is that all you've got? Have you swapped us for them without a second thought? You couldn't carry the drum, but took away the computer, right? What was it you used to tell me – that it was all you had from your home? Where is your home, who are you anyway? What kind of people lived on that small patch of land? The kind that fought and killed each other? But some

of you escaped. What else can you do except running away? As soon as you felt the danger, you bolted, left your home and then your only child! You rejected, sold, gave away, sacrificed her!