

# **Bon Voyage, Petro**

**by Elene Japaridze**

excerpt

*translated by Giorgi Gogilashvili*

# Zina

This scene often floats to the surface of my mind: a small yard, Maio in her mottled robe, then I hear *La traviata*. I can smell the green grass and the oleanders. A short flight of stairs climbs from the yard to the glazed loggia of the house. The loggia has great, wide windows, and if you look through one of them, you'll see Margo. She sits in a large armchair, with a raised, puffy hairstyle, her eyes closed, smoking a slim cigarette and complementing the music with her voice. Maio sweeps the yard, dancing as she does.

She beams with a golden-toothed grin:

"Margush, dear, turn it up a bit!" she might shout so she can feel the music more deeply. She whirls about a broom with a wooden handle, whirls herself about, too, holding her head high, laughing, at times removing her headscarf, being happy. Maio, too, knows the lyrics by heart: "*Libiamo ne' lieti calici*," sings Pavarotti. Margo loved Verdi and *La traviata*. "Opera ennobles," she would always say. "A child raised on good opera will grow into a good person."

Maio was my grandmother. "Kurdish Maio," as the neighbors, locals, and all of Vera<sup>1</sup> called her. Everyone in Vera knew Maio. Everyone knew me, too, as Maio's granddaughter. We lived in the basement of the house that stood at 3 Kiacheli Street and whose opposite side led out to 6 Perov Street. There was in the middle of the house a courtyard full of roses, linden trees, and oleander bushes. In this

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<sup>1</sup>A residential area in Tbilisi.

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yard, Paola, Petro, and I played together. Margo's grandchildren the twins—Petro and Paola—and I grew up together.

There was a time when the entire two-story colossus of a house, with its long hallways and tall windows, had belonged to Margo's parents. Margo's father, Pierre, had come to Georgia before World War I. He had apparently gone mad for Georgia; he'd fallen in love with Kakheti and gone into winemaking. He was 25 years old when he met Margo's mother, Barbara, at a resort in Poland. "I'm going to show you the most beautiful country, the sunniest country," he'd said. "Full of meandering roads and love." Barbara, charmed by Pierre's gallantry and intellect, had agreed. They were married soon after.

Pierre combined the Georgian and French winemaking traditions in an interplay that produced incredible vintages year after year, and he soon became renowned in all of eastern Georgia. When Barbara became pregnant, she told her husband that she wanted her child to be born in the city and attend one of the good schools there; Pierre complied with his wife's wishes. He bought one of the most beautiful and large-windowed houses on one of the most beautiful and tranquil streets of Tbilisi. It was in this house that Margo was born.

Then came the Bolsheviks. Chaos ensued, though they were not completely successful in stripping them of their home. They relocated two families into the second floor of the house, while the Meurées kept the first floor. In '37, solely on account of his birth in France, they accused Pierre of being a spy and had him arrested, tortured, and finally, shot. They didn't touch Barbara and Margo, however. They didn't even relocate them. Maio would often say, "That was all Barbara's doing. She was a wily one, that Barbara. She knew some Bolshevik higher-ups." But she would tell me this secretly, as I recounted to her over and over in our basement the stories Margo had recounted to me.

"It was really their house? The whole thing? Was Margo's

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mother really the most beautiful woman ever? Did you ever see Barbara, Maio?" I talked the ears off of a tired and hungry Maio with a thousand questions.

"I know, doll, I know those stories. You think she's telling them for the first time? She's told them at least a thousand times. Before, she used to tell them for the upstairs neighbors to hear, so they would know who the real housewife and master of this house was. Oh, and they know... but what do they care! We're the only ones they haven't relocated. They've relocated so many people to that second floor, and then relocated them elsewhere, or had them shot. Do you know how many, doll? Every time, a new set of tenants would come and get settled. Then some men in black overcoats would come knocking, drag them out in the middle of the night, and never return a single one. And so... every time, Margo goes on and on to the new tenants about how her father bought this house for her mother," the tired Maio would answer. To me, all these stories sounded like fairy tales.

I grew up alongside Paola and Petro. We lived together, rose from bed together, went to bed together, ate together, dreamed together, and thought up fantastic games together. We had many things in common. Like me, they didn't have a mother. Margo's daughter Mira had died in childbirth. A sacrifice for the twins. Mira's husband didn't want to raise them and promptly evaporated, and the grandmother was left with two tiny twins to bring up. I also had no mother, but Petro and Paola had many pictures of theirs. She had been a very beautiful woman, blonde with lightly colored eyes. My mother would probably have had darker features like mine, but Maio had no photos of her and always told different stories about her. She spun as many tales as she had gold teeth. She would forget whether and when she had told certain stories, get confused, and begin to grumble before finally tucking me into bed and telling me:

"You have Maio, doll. And as long as you have Maio, you don't need to worry about a thing."

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Eventually she only had three gold teeth left. She took them out and sold them so she could buy some schoolbooks for me. My Maio.

Margo spoke Georgian, Russian, and French. Petro and Paola were the meaning and hope of her life. She doted on Petro especially. She brought him to all sorts of things, to every kind of club and tutor. Do you know what she called Petro? "*Pierre*."<sup>2</sup> Paola had been the one to name him "Petro." She couldn't pronounce "*Pierre*" when she was little and so Petro was stuck with "Petro."

I was quite young when I realized I needed to escape the basement and its damp dustiness. I was always hungry. No, it wasn't food that I was hungry for—I had my share of Margo's "*côtelettes* and *purée*," and Paola and Petro shared their candy with me, too. We practically breakfasted, lunched, and dined together. While Maio was busy sweeping other yards and buildings, Margo prepared delicious meals. Not herself, of course. For this she had a domestic servant, Nastiko. She was an old, hunched woman. She had been Margo's mother's, Barbara's, servant, and she stayed on with Margo to the end. Nastiko fried exceptional cutlets and potatoes. The aroma of her fried potatoes would come to rest over all of *Perovskaya*.<sup>3</sup> Petro was a fussy eater. Paola, an even fussier one. I, on the other hand, ate everything. It seems I understood that if I didn't eat with them, I'd be left with Maio's black bread and *Yubilyeinoye Pechenye*<sup>4</sup> as my fate. So I didn't say no to anything. Still, I was always hungry. I was hungry for my mother, for my father, for pretty dresses, for that room with velvet curtains, for that large, old-fashioned mirror, for Margo's soft hands, for the scent of vanilla and cinnamon. I was hungry for another life and it tortured me. So

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<sup>2</sup>I.e., "Pierre" with the standard French pronunciation, using a guttural /r/. The original Georgian conveys this difference with the use of the letter ჳ, which also represents the guttural /r/, rather than რ. Italics are used here instead to mark the same difference.

<sup>3</sup>From *Perovskaya Ulitsa*, the Russian for "Perov Street."

<sup>4</sup>A brand of mass-produced cookies ubiquitous in the Soviet Union.

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I swallowed everything—unchewed, greedily—to sate that unbearable hunger.

I audited Pao's and Petro's lessons from a seat in the corner of the room, staying there as long as they studied and absorbing everything: every one of Margo's words, Margo's pronunciation, the melody of her words, the Russian and French phrases, with which she was never stingy. She spewed different phrases into the air right alongside her cigarette smoke. I committed to memory her refined mannerisms, her elegant to's and fro's. I studied Pao's manner of dress, her hairstyle, and her good manners. And everything she taught them, I greedily consumed. It seems I knew in the depths of my heart that this was the only way to free myself of that intolerable poverty.

My poor Maio smelled of must and humidity. I can smell it vividly even now. I feel ill.

They admitted me at the school thanks to Margo's connections. On the first of September, Pao, Petro, and I went to first grade. Maio did herself up elaborately. She dyed her hair with henna, put on some long, unicolor dress, and left her broom at the gate to the yard. I gave her a stern look and forbade her from coming with us. I wanted Margo to take us. I was ashamed of Maio. Maio's eyes brimmed with tears; she turned her back to me and made for the basement.

We pranced out of the yard. I wore an old dress of Pao's, mended here and there, but I was content. Petro's hair was combed to the left, and he wore black shorts and a white shirt. Margo tied a ribbon around his neck. Pao had tied her chestnut locks with red ribbon herself, and she felt confident in her blue dress with its white front.

I knew that I had hurt Maio. My heart shriveled. But I knew that it was better this way—not for the briefest moment did I want to be Kurdish Maio's granddaughter. If only for a day, I wanted Margo's limelight to fall upon me a little as well. To feel, if only the once, that Pao, Petro, and I were the same sort of kids, by the aroma of vanilla

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and cinnamon.

Petro and Paola sat next to each other. I stood for a long time and thought about whom I should sit next to. Then I liked the look of one girl and sat next to her, but she leapt from her seat and ran crying to the teacher. "I don't want to sit next to that one," she said. I wasn't sure what to do. The teacher didn't stick up for me, saying, "All right, all right, I'll find you a different seat."

More and more children kept pouring into the classroom. Some brought flowers that they left on the teacher's desk. Paola and Petro sat silently, holding hands. The first day of school is the most upsetting and, at the same time, the most dangerous. You transition from a small world into a big one. Everything is new: the students, the teachers, the schedule, the letters, the numbers... Thanks to Margo, Petro, Paola, and I knew arithmetic as well as writing. Margo had been preparing the twins for school. In her view, they needed to be well prepared to amaze the teachers when they started going. "Everyone should be talking about how smart Margaret Meurée's kids are." Since I had also been attending Petro and Paola's lessons, Maio found herself with a well-prepared little Zina as well. But no one took any notice of me. I realized on the very first day of school that everyone in the neighborhood knew I was Maio's granddaughter. The children of the well-to-do families of Vera considered it beneath them to sit next to me.

So, no one did sit next to me. I often looked to Petro and Paola's desk. They sat in silence, listening intently to the teacher. During the break, Paola introduced herself to all the girls. They twirled their dresses in the school hallway, snickered at one thing or another, played tag. Wherever I went, everyone would flee or tense up. Not even Paola deigned to notice me.

"Kurdish Zina is in our class? How come!" asked one loudly enough for me to hear, a well-groomed, blue-eyed girl, and shot a hateful glare my way.

"My mom said the twins' grandma asked the principal,"

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another answered. "She was telling my dad at home about how she'd been asking her the whole year to accept Zina."

"Oh, right, they have that cleaning lady. I guess they hired Zina as a cleaning lady, too, so she would clean up and look after the twins here," said a third with a snicker.

Paola was standing right there, had heard everything, but said nothing. I think she was afraid of being cast out along with me. Paola really wanted to make friends and garner authority and respect at school, so she thought coming to my defense would mean hurting herself.

We went all the way to seventh and eighth grade such that she practically ignored me in school. She never talked to me during breaks, never sat next to me. We would go to school together, but at the entrance she would tell me, "Zina, you go ahead and I'll follow behind, as if we came separately." In the first few grades, we left school separately, too. Nastiko or Margo would be waiting for them at the school's entrance. I knew that I would have to leave a little later and catch up to them afterwards, as though I was leaving separately.

As soon as we got to the yard, Paola would turn back into the old Paola again, my Paola. Right then and there, her expression would change, she would take my hand, we would rush into the kitchen from the yard, quickly wash our hands and faces, and seat ourselves at the prepared dinner table. We ate together, studied together, and went on with life. It was enough to go beyond the confines of Perov Street for Paola to take on a completely different regard and intonation when interacting with me.

My heart ached, everything inside me shriveled up, but I also understood why she acted this way. Why would anyone want to be friends with me? Unkempt, orphaned little Kurdish Zina. If we hadn't lived together, in one yard, from birth, Paola would never have considered me worth even a greeting. Yes, from the day we first opened our eyes, we were always together, but I could still never be fit for their company on account of my background, poor Maio, and living in the basement. So I slowly realized that it wasn't



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worth it for her to be laughed at and made fun of by others for my sake.

Only in tenth grade, when Margo became ill, the city fell into darkness, and we wandered the streets aimlessly most of the time, did she stop hiding her friendship with me. At the time, there was complete chaos and lawlessness, so no one could trouble themselves to mind Kurdish Zina. Also, Paola had more or less earned her place among the elite of the school and the neighborhood by then. And now the tables had turned—she needed to make a name for herself in the street to guarantee her safety, so that some low-life or criminal wouldn't dare touch her. And in the street, Kurdish Zina and her friend Erica were the authority. The street has different rules. Different laws govern it. The values of the city were upturned, white became black, bad became good, lawlessness, thievery, deviance, and banditry became the norm. No one asked for the advice of the professors and the intelligentsia anymore. The children and grandchildren of the highbrow, elite families retreated to their hiding holes. Armed, black-clad, impudent, and unrestrained people came out into the streets—the types in whose circles Zina and Erica were a good fit in the eyes of the elites. Pao realized that she would have to take my hand to save herself. And I took hers. Because I loved both Pao and Petro more than they could imagine.

Petro was completely different and otherworldly. He was always by my side—in the school cafeteria, in the hallways, the foyer, the classroom. Quiet, smiling Petro. Sometimes he said nothing and simply stood by me. I know he understood how difficult it was for me in the city's snobbiest school, attended only by the children and grandchildren of doctors, architects, academics, and theatergoers, showing off their velvet and satin dresses, their nice backpacks and ribbons. Petro knew how much I was hurting because he was hurting, too. True, he was the grandson of the French Margo, respected by all, rather than of Maio, but he was very different from all the other boys, so he was treated with disdain just as I was. Sometimes even

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more so. The older boys laughed at him, shoved him during breaks, tried to trip him. His knees were always raw from falling to the sawdust-strewn wooden floors.

He didn't know how to stand up for himself back then. He couldn't have beaten anyone in a fight. He would become mute, freeze up. He stood there with his head held low, still as a statue.

I didn't freeze up. I only felt hurt.

Paola would sometimes stick up for Petro. She would talk back to the older boys in her brother's stead. How many times did she take him by the hand and drag him out of an encirclement of those boys? Yes, Paola was capable of getting things done at school, but when lawlessness began to rule the streets, Erica and I became the bright-eyed, cinnamon-scented twins' only hope.