

Nana Ekvimishvili THE PEAR FIELD

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Chapter 7, page 157

Marika gives Irakli English lessons, but from time to time she chats about Manana. They'd got close. You know how it is when you're in the same block, now and again you borrow something from the neighbours, or you might knock on their door to ask to use the phone. It's sad, Marika tells them, now Manana has left, she doesn't know who she'll be friends with.

That day Lela can't give Marika the money, but she promises her she'll have it by the next lesson.

The following day, while Goderdzi is lying under his car with his mates all standing around watching him, Lela goes up to Koba and tells him secretly, so nobody can hear:

'I've got business with you.'

Lela and Koba meet each other at the bottom of Kerchi street.

Lela opens the car door and gets in. Koba looks pleased with himself as he drives across town, staying on the highway until the Tianeti junction. From the speeding car, Lela idly watches streets, houses, dogs lying in the road and one or two pedestrians who have no idea that she's going to the woods with Koba. She gazes at the strangers, enjoying the sensation.

Koba turns off the highway and onto a narrow, unmetalled road. There are cornfields on both sides, nothing but greenery, and in front of them the empty track curves between hedges, past a hill grazed by a single cow, to disappear somewhere further into the woods.

Koba begins to undress. Today he's wearing a blue and brown check shirt and under it a white vest, instead of a shirt with palm trees. He's as thin as a rake. Now he's taking off his Pyramid jeans and putting them on the back seat of the car.

‘Take off your clothes,’ he tells Lela, who’s been smoking meanwhile. Lela snaps off the end of her cigarette and puts the rest into her front pocket for later. She starts to undress.

Koba sits there in just his underwear and his socks. His underpants are sticking out in the middle, as though the cloth were stretched over an ice-cream cone. He takes a condom out of his wallet and puts it nearby. Lela’s taken off all her clothes but her knickers and vest. She pushes the car seat back. Koba keeps tugging at Lela’s knickers, not because he wants to remove them but he wants to make her understand she should take them off herself... Koba pulls down his underpants and rolls the condom onto his penis, which looks like a skinned animal to Lela. Lela still has her knickers half on when Koba pushes his rubber-wrapped penis into her vagina and falls on top of her, groaning. Koba begins to move, pulls up Lela’s vest and clutches her left breast as if it might squeeze through his fingers like dough. Koba sweats. Lela tries to move with him to make him come more quickly, although she senses Koba doesn’t like that, he prefers it when she lies motionless and he pushes his penis in and out all by himself. Lela has her legs in the air, pressing the soles of her feet against the roof of the car. Suddenly she’s surprised by Koba moving his lips towards her, pressing his big mouth against hers. Lela feels Koba’s cold lips and wet tongue flopping about in his mouth like a dying fish. A weird sensation seizes Lela, a warm feeling in her stomach. She wraps her legs around Koba’s sweaty back and starts to move. Koba seems to get more aroused but he won’t let Lela do anything, he doesn’t like her being active. Koba tears himself from her lips, holds her legs still with both hands and pumps more vigorously. Lela does not object. She instantly loses the desire to move and the warmth in her stomach disappears. At that moment Koba, with several thrusts of his skinny behind, comes, howls and slumps on top of Lela like a corpse.

Several minutes later they are dressed. They set out on the road back to town. It is dusk, people are standing in the street waiting for the bus with their shopping bags and it occurs to Lela for a moment that they could be an ordinary husband and wife driving home at evening time, their children waiting for them.

Koba stops his car a good distance from the children’s home and gives Lela five lari.

Lela walks back along the road, smoking a cigarette.

She arrives back at the children’s home and finds the yard empty. Probably everybody’s watching TV. She goes into the caretaker’s hut, lies on the bed and in a couple of minutes falls fast asleep.

The next lesson is again held in the caretaker's hut. Lela seems to be in a bad mood. She lies flat on the bed without moving, gazing at the ceiling.

Irakli's eyes are red. Recently he has been complaining of headaches every lesson.

'Come on, tell me how you would say "I am hungry", and "I am very hungry".'

"I am hungry", "I am starvi."

'Starving.'

'Yes,' Irakli says.

'Now let's repeat the words again-' Marika says.

He sighs deeply, glancing at Lela, trying to signal to her with a look that he cannot bear anymore.

'Listen, you,' Lela sits up suddenly. Marika looks at Lela.

'Can't you teach him other sorts of stuff?' she looks at Marika challengingly.

'What kind of thing?' Marika asks.

'Swearwords!' Irakli perks up.

'Shut up for a minute, kid, while I speak,' Lela snaps at him. She turns to Marika again. 'The words he's going to need, you get me?'

'But what exactly?'

'What exactly... well, for example, *kle* - what's that in English?'

Irakli bursts out laughing. This time, Lela doesn't tell him off. Marika blushes slightly and her long nose seems to get a little longer.

Then, surprised at herself, she says, 'It's ... *dick*.'

'What did you say?' Lela did not expect an answer so quickly.

'It's dick,' Marika says decisively.

'Shut up, you dick,' Lela tries her newly-acquired knowledge on Irakli. She can't help laughing, and at the same time she says thoughtfully,

'How do you say, for example, "Get out of here, you dick".'

'Why's he going to need to say that?'

'He'll need to, I'm telling you! If he doesn't, he won't say it, but if he needs to, d'you expect him to call us up and ask? Let's teach him just in case!'

'I don't know,' Marika becomes pensive. 'How would I know? We don't study swear words, I don't need them. I only know that one because in the lessons one boy kept saying "dick-shenari" - dictionary.'

'Oh-' Lela understands. They sit silently for some time.

'I can ask around, I know some people who might know, if you really want me to.'

'Yes, we do want you to - why wouldn't we? He can learn all those "cats" and "dogs" out there anyway, let's teach him the kind of thing he needs so nobody dares to do anything to him!'

'Ok, then tell me what else you want,' Marika says, tearing a page from Irakli's exercise book and picking up a pen.

Irakli has thoroughly woken up now. He folds his legs on the chair and sits up at the table as though he's about to be given something delicious to eat. Suddenly the English lesson interests him; he's forgotten all about his headache and his sore eyes. He is not as impressed by learning swearwords as he is by hearing them from Lela. That's what has really made this boring lesson fun.

'Let's get on with it,' Lela says, sitting cross-legged and looking out of the window. She reminds her. 'Have you written it down? "Get out of here, you dick, get out".'

'Yes, I've got that.'

'All right, next:' Lela says, '"Get your hands off me, you old bugger.'

'Wow!' Marika laughs as she writes it down. 'It probably can't be translated exactly, but I'll find an equivalent.'

'Next:' Lela says, thinking. 'Don't touch me or I'll fuck you up the arse.'

Irakli giggles. Marika scribbles away.

'Hey, how about-' Irakli struggles to think of something; he's longing to participate in this compilation of useful vocabulary, but he can't think of anything that will really blow their socks off. 'How about "Don't fucking move" or something like that?'

'Wait,' Lela interrupts him. 'This is better: "I'll smash all your bones one by one".'

Irakli likes it. Marika writes it down.

'Well, I don't advise you to say such things in America, you know... It's a different country... not like Georgia.'

'You just write it down and then he can say them if he needs to! Anyway,' Lela points at Irakli, 'Have you ever heard him swearing?'

Marika shrugs her shoulders. 'No-'

'So d'you really think he doesn't know the words ? Huh ... he's smart, if he needs to to, he can shock anyone! Do you think he should let anyone diss him?'

'OK,' Marika says, still writing, 'So:" I'll smash all your bones one by one..."

'OK!' Lela says, 'First let's find out this lot, and then we'll think of more.'

Marika leaves. Lela gives her five lari. She is still ten lari in debt for the previous two weeks. She promises to pay her soon.

The 'American' woman, Madonna (translator's note: Madonna is a Georgian woman living in America and acting as a liaison between the children's home and prospective parents) is visiting the children's home. Children buzz around her like bees around a walking beehive.

Dali is looking for Lela and Irakli. She hurries over to the caretaker's hut and flings open the door, out of breath.

'Madonna's come!' she gasps to Lela and Irakli.

Silhouetted in the sunlit doorway with her tangled hair and pear-shaped body, Dali looks like some strange creature from a folk tale.

'Let's go, they've sent some photos from America,' Dali says, staring at their astonished faces for a moment, then turning on her heel and running back as fast as she can. At that moment Dali's like one of the children in the home, who just occasionally feel happy about something in this dreary life. She runs at full tilt towards this glimpse of happiness.

Lela quickly puts on her shoes and she and Irakli run after Dali, also at top speed.

They go into the head teacher Tsitso's room. There, children are already crowding around Tsitso, Madonna and Dali and they look at the photos Madonna's brought. The woman has laid out the photos on her fat quince-like knees.

'Come here, kid, take a look at your parents ... your mother, your father...' Madonna tells him.

Dali's eyes well with tears. Two people stand in front of neatly trimmed shrubs: a tall, greyish-haired man in jeans and white T-shirt smiling heartily behind a bushy moustache and a broad-hipped woman in a long, colourful skirt and a white top. The woman has straight, ash-coloured hair to her shoulders and a broad smile on her face.

‘There they are, John and Deborah,’ Madonna says solemnly, tapping the photo with her finger, ‘You don’t know what great people they are, they’re wonderful! I’m going to bring some journalists over in the next few days, I’ve already told the story to one or two important people and they’ve expressed an interest... And they are very impressed at the Ministry too, they’ve helped me a lot-’

The children listen, hypnotized.

‘Irakli, do you like the look of Deborah and John?’ Dali asks him.

Irakli shrugs his shoulders. ‘Yeah.’

‘Will they come here sometimes, too?’ Pako asks, but nobody answers him and soon he himself forgets his own question.

Lela looks at John and Deborah. She studies their faces closely, their clothes and their shrubs. In the corner of the photograph there’s the bonnet of a car.

‘Is this car theirs?’ Lela asks.

‘I don’t know-’ Madonna says dismissively and brings out other photographs: members of John’s and Deborah’s family, children, grown-up men and women, who apparently already live separately in their own houses. And now Madonna shows the children surrounding her pictures of John’s and Deborah’s adopted children, who are all different ages and appearances. They don’t look anything like their parents or each other. Alongside several fair children is a young black man looking straight at the camera and beaming. He’s wearing a black robe and a strange black hat, and his straight, white teeth flash. Suddenly the kids burst into giggles.

‘Evil! Knock on wood!’ Levana shouts.

The children roll about laughing. Madonna tries amidst the uproar to explain the identity of the man in the photo, but nobody’s listening to her anymore. Lela grasps more or less that this black boy is also one of John and Deborah’s adoptive children, and this was the day he graduated from some kind of college with distinction.

‘He probably got a gold medal,’ Lela thinks, remembering Kirile.

Soon this gathering disperses too and everybody drifts away to watch TV.

Once more, Koba and Lela meet each other at the bottom of Kerchi street. Koba doesn’t want anyone to see the girl from the retarded kids’ home getting into his car. He takes the back roads across town to get where they’re going. If someone catches sight of her, he makes her duck down and hide in the car.

The sun has been intense all day long, it is baking inside the car and when Koba drives out of town, a pleasantly cool breeze blows in through the windows.

Lela lies with her legs open listening to the chirping of the crickets, and several times she thinks she hears somebody coming. Koba takes a look around and is convinced that no-one's making a sound apart from crickets. Lela relaxes, embraces Koba with her legs and follows the rocking. Koba doesn't like Lela's movements, he tries to take control and not allow Lela to move. Without realizing what she's doing, Lela grabs his buttock and pulls it hard towards her, she feels a scorching heat in her belly, her body is possessed by an overwhelming sensation as if it's become a single substance, an ocean washing backwards and forwards, and then the heat is pouring out from her belly throughout her entire body, she squeezes Koba's buttock tightly and moans shamelessly. Koba, shaken and aroused, stares at Lela, a droplet of sweat dangling from his nose; then he comes in helpless ecstasy.

Lela gets out of the car, goes to the field to pee and stays there for some time. When she comes back Koba's already dressed. He stands near the car and smokes. Lela asks him for a cigarette.

They get into the car without a word. Koba takes his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans and hands Lela a five lari note.

'I don't want it,' Lela says abruptly.

Koba looks at her surprised, not understanding what she means.

'I don't want it,' Lela repeats.

Her face is flushed, the sweaty hair on her forehead hangs in locks. It seems to Koba that Lela is smiling faintly.

'I don't want it,' Lela says again, 'I came too.'

Suddenly Koba hits her in the face with the back of his hand. She shrieks from the unexpected pain, her lip bursts and she covers her mouth.

'You retard! Get out of here!'

Lela covers her mouth with one hand while she opens the car door with the other and clambers out. Koba throws the five lari in Lela's direction and slams the door shut. The car reverses back out of the field and Lela is left standing there in the middle of the road among the corn. Left alone, Lela suddenly becomes a road ghost, unmoving, with no purpose apart from to frighten passing travellers.

The sound of the car dwindles. Lela picks up the five lari note from the hedge and shoves it into her pocket. The crickets seem to be getting louder. The evening is closing in and a bluish light settles over the countryside. The wind steals into the

field from nowhere, and the corn begins to rustle like the sea. Lela quickens her pace. Soon she reaches the road and holds out her thumb to the passing cars.

A white Niva stops and Lela gets in. The driver is a middle-aged man with a tired look and a working man's hands. He gazes at Lela's face and takes in her bloody mouth.

'What's happened to you, did someone hurt you?'

Lela suddenly bursts into tears. She rubs her dirty hands over her face, wipes her eyes and grimaces. A lump in her throat is choking her.

The man stops the car by the side of the road. He hunts around for something on the back seat of the car, gets out and walks around to Lela's side, opening the door. He holds a bottle of water towards Lela.

'Hold out your hands, I'll help you wash your face.'

Lela gets out of the car, leans forward a little and stretches her palms to the stranger. She splashes water onto her face.

'You're a young girl, you shouldn't be going out alone,' says the middle-aged man, when both of them are back in the car driving towards town, 'There are too many bad people around...' The man looks in front of him. 'Do you have parents?'

'Yes,' says Lela.

'How old are you?'

'Eighteen.'

'Where do you live? I'll see you home-'

'If you drive, I'll show you where to stop.'

They are quiet for some time.

'What were you doing out there?' the man breaks the silence.

A gigantic lorry, revving deafeningly, passes the Niva, black smoke billowing behind it, and then Lela says,

'My friend took me out ... then I dunno... he went away and just dumped me there.'

'Your friend did that to you?' the stranger says, without looking at Lela. Lela looks at the man's profile and she is suddenly astonished by the deep, rough crow's feet around his eyes.

The man shakes his head and says nothing.

Lela looks out of the window, feeling tense. She does not want this man to ask her any more questions.

At nightfall they arrive back in town and Lela recognises her own street. She points the man in the opposite direction and asks him to stop at the doorway of one of the blocks of flats.

‘Can you stop here, please. Thank you,’ says Lela and opens the car door.

The man looks at the yard: children are playing nearby, a group of lads is hanging around ... It looks as though he’s trying to spot something suspicious, but he doesn’t succeed: it is an ordinary yard, it’s evening, the lengthening shadows on the walls add a touch of elegance to the scene, and from an upper floor a mother can be heard calling for a child called Vakho.

‘Watch who you go out with! There are too many bad people in this world,’ the man says. ‘Thousands of bad ’uns around,’ he repeats.

Lela leaves the car and hurries into the doorway of the first block of flats she comes to, as though she lived there.

It’s already night by the time Lela gets to the bath house. The echoing, booming sound of water that the huge bath house makes frightens her.

Lela arrives at last at the caretaker’s hut and in the half-dark makes out the form of Irakli, fast asleep on her bed. She gazes at him for some time. The moonlight is shining on the boy. Lela looks at him and thinks that the Americans are right, Irakli really does have a delicate face and white, nearly translucent skin. He snuffles peacefully. Lela sits down on the bed and takes off her shoes. She shoves Irakli over to the wall with her back. Irakli squirms, flattens himself against the wall and carries on sleeping. Through her back Lela can feel his breathing. She recalls Koba and the five lari banknote in her trouser pocket ... the middle-aged man and his eye fringed with crows’ feet. She tries to think about it, but she can’t marshal her thoughts. Soon she falls asleep herself.

The following day Lela makes her way to the yard in front of a neighbouring block of flats. The yard’s usually empty at this time of year; it’s the summer holidays and anyone who has family out in the villages, or a summer house, has taken their family there. Only a few children are left. They sit at a table in the shade, playing cards and looking miserable. Not far away the local lads are hanging out, including Koba and Goderdzi, now rehabilitated and getting ready for the next wedding. For once Goderdzi is not lying on a trolley under his car. Instead his mate Gocha’s washing the

car with a hose. Lela walks up to them and stands in front of Koba. Koba looks astonished to see her. The guys also look at her in surprise. Lela takes out the five lari banknote from her pocket and proffers it to Koba. Koba's face flushes, he can't understand what Lela wants.

'Take your five lari, I don't need them,' says Lela.

'Get out of here, you bitch!' Koba pushes her hand away, upset, and turns his back on her. Then, furious, he swings round again, glares at her and spits, 'Get the hell out of here!'

The guys laugh.

'What's going on? What's she after?' Gocha wonders.

'Hey, you can give me those five lari if you don't want them, I'll have them!'

Somebody chuckles.

'You can fuck your grandmother for those five lari, do you hear?' Lela says and throws the money at Koba's feet.

At once the guys roar with laughter. Somebody even applauds. One character with a goatee says with satisfaction:

'Bravo!'

'Is this what you've been hiding, Koba?' One slouching, skinny bloke in a denim waistcoat, 'You're that desperate, are you, mate?'

'You bitch, come here... I'll fuck you up the arse!' Koba shouts at Lela and lunges in her direction. The guys grab hold of him and Lela runs away towards the home.

'You're a retard, a total retard!' Koba bellows after her.

Lela halts suddenly, turns back towards Koba. 'I don't want to see your shitty car in the carpark, or else I'll tell Tsitso about your five lari, and Piruza too, and you'll be fucked yourself for wanting to fuck an idiot! And you can give your five lari to sluts like your mother!'

'Hey, stop that,' a guy with a deep, warm voice says, irritated. The others are still holding Koba back but Gocha points the hose at Lela. The spray doesn't reach her, and the bloke in the denim waistcoat bends and picks up a pebble to throw at her ankles. But the warm bass voice says:

'Leave her alone, she's just a girl...'

An old man is peering out of his window. Now a woman sticks her head out of the window too and asks what's going on with a frown.

'Nothing, you hear!' the one with a goatee yells at his mother, and the grumpy woman moves away from the window.

Before Koba moves his car out of the carpark, he comes across Lela one evening on the corner of Kerchi Street and punches her in the face. Lela falls to the ground and Koba kicks her in the belly and the back several times. After that Koba leaves and disappears from Lela's life forever.

Chapter 9, page 198

The day of Irakli's departure from the home finally arrives.

Before Lela leaves the caretaker's hut, she stands in front of a little crucifix stuck on to her mirror and crosses herself.

Irakli is waiting at the gates with the small black suitcase that Deborah's given him as a present. Around his neck he's wearing another present from John and Deborah, a small fabric wallet with the logo of some airline with his passport inside.

All the children cluster near the gates.

Irakli leafs through his brand new passport and the children look intently at each page. On one of the pages there's an American visa with Irakli's photograph. Irakli permits Stela to look through his passport. She inspects the visa, then she flicks to the last page and stares at Irakli's picture again. Suddenly Levana tries to snatch the passport out of Stela's hand and Stela shoves her hand away, screaming in an abnormal voice. The veins in her throat bulge and she glares at Levana, shouting, 'It'll get torn!'

Her pale, narrow face blushes scarlet, she raises her arm and, eyes wide, searches for Irakli among the children as if begging him to help.

Irakli sees Stela's desperation and tells her in a calm voice, 'Give him a turn,' although his instruction sounds more like a request than an order.

Stela, calmed, but still a bit worked up by Levana's rudeness, hands him the passport, and Levana carefully opens the small, burgundy-coloured book and pores over it as closely as a love letter.

'Now, Irakli, be a good boy!' Dali's voice drifts over to them from somewhere.

The children can see the adults coming towards them now: Deborah and John, Dali, Madonna and Tsitso. Levana passes Irakli his passport and asks him to bring a car and a pistol back for him from America. This makes the kids laugh.

Dali is looking tearful. Tsitso comes over to Lela and explains to her who should sit where in the cars on their way to the airport.

Stela hugs Irakli. Then Vaska, his smile suddenly extinguished, goes up to Irakli and takes his hand as if for a bout of arm-wrestling.

Next Dali embraces Irakli, saying, 'We haven't sent anyone as far as you yet.' She breaks into loud sobs.

'Yes, Miss Dali!' Levana breaks in, 'We sent Sergo even further, God help him wherever he is!'

'Stop it!' says Dali, frightened, and Tsitso, who is standing nearby, talking animatedly to Madonna, casts a deadly look at Levana.

'Just wait, I'll deal with you later.'

John takes a group picture of all the children with Irakli in the middle. Everybody wants to stand near him, anxious perhaps that if they aren't right next to him they won't fit in the photo.

Marika turns up. She's just been on holiday and she's looking tanned, in a short, yellow sundress with a pattern of small blue flowers sprinkled here and there. Her loose hair flows over her brown shoulders and the summer sun has also sprinkled tiny freckles on her nose. When Levana sees Marika, smiling and wearing that outfit, he's suddenly rooted to the spot.

Marika brings Irakli a small English dictionary as a present.

'Dick-shenari,' Irakli grins at her. Marika smiles back.

Shalva starts the car. His furrowed forehead is studded with beads of sweat. The handkerchief covering his neck is also sodden. The sun blazes down on all of them.

Zaira rushes across Kerchi Street and waves to the car, looking upset. She brings some sweets from her kiosk and hands out them to the children, and then she hugs Irakli.

'Don't forget us, Irakli!'

Tsitso's husband, Temuri, turns up from somewhere driving a white imported car. Tsitso's husband is a bald, skinny man, with a flattened nose and a reasonably sincere smile. Obviously a heavy smoker, his skin is a terrible colour. Every few

seconds he puts his hand to his mouth and gives a shuddering cough. Tsitso tells everyone to get in the car.

Madonna takes the front seat of Shalva's car, while John and Deborah sit in the back. In her husband's car, Tsitso sits in the front and Lela and Irakli are together in the back.

Tsitso winds down a window and fans her face with her hands.

Both cars set off and soon Dali and her godchildren are alone again at the gates of the children's home. The children are still waving goodbye.

Irakli has his window wound down during the drive and he turns his face to feel the wind. Tsitso and Temuri are speaking in the front, but he can't hear them over the noise of the engine. Lela looks out of the window too. She's imagining that she's going to America herself and saying a last goodbye to everything she can see. The home, Dali and the children, all the teachers: Avto, Gulnara, Vano, Tsitso and the trainee Khatuna; across the street, she's waving goodbye to Zaira and her kiosk, and the neighbours - Marika, Koba, Goderdzi and his new wife Irma - they are all left behind. The car turns out of Kerchi Street and Lela parts forever with her old life.

Irakli is dressed very smartly. He wears a dark navy shirt buttoned up to the neck. Jeans with a red rubber belt, trainers chosen from the bag brought by John and Deborah. Irakli is quiet, he seems content and calm, somehow grown-up.

On the way he notices various streets and buildings. 'I've seen that one before...'

Lela looks vaguely at the buildings and shops, the little kiosks and the people in the streets whom they leave behind so quickly. They become distant and dwindle away.

'When I get back from the airport I'll kill Vano,' Lela thinks, 'and then I'll leave. I'll be out of there, like the others-'

Lela imagines herself in the street. She imagines herself standing there, asking passers-by the way and then following their directions. She'd look for Yana, who used to be at the home... She imagines finding Yana and going with her to her rented room. 'If they catch me,' Lela thinks, 'they'll let me go soon ... Or they could send me to an asylum-'

Yana again comes into Lela's mind, but she's small again, as little as the day she left the home, as though she hasn't grown another inch since leaving. She is still wearing her check shirt buttoned up to the collar and her lips are pursed just as they used to be. Lela tells her that for her sake she'll pick through all the bins on Marjanishvili. Yana smiles. Yana's flat is a bit like her neighbour Mzia's flat. In the hallway there's a dressing table with a telephone on it, just like at Mzia's. Yana has an apron like Mzia and there's a smell of pastry in the house.

'Follow me,' says the grave, pursed-lipped Yana to Lela. They leave her room and go out. They have some business. Lela is so happy that her feet don't touch the ground as she walks along. Suddenly she remembers that Irakli's going to America and all thoughts of Yana disappear.

They pull up in front of the airport. As soon as they step out of the car, Irakli tells Lela that he has a headache and he feels sick, although both of them know that this is no time to be like that.

They join the check-in queue.

'I feel sick,' Irakli whines again.

'You'll feel better soon,' Lela says.

Madonna can hear what Irakli's saying and she tells John. Suddenly John takes Irakli off somewhere, and a few minutes later they return with a big packet of chewing gum. Irakli does as John tells him and opens the pack, takes out sticks of gum and offers them to everyone in the group. The women accept the gum enthusiastically, but Temuri refuses. Shalva's not standing in the queue; he paces gloomily up and down nearby.

Temuri puts the Americans' cases along with Irakli's small suitcase on the conveyor belt. After check-in, John invites everybody to the only café in the airport. A waiter with tired eyes and an unhappy expression pushes two tables together and puts several menus out, as if he'd like to get rid of them already.

Coffee, juices, several cakes and a sandwich are brought to the table. Temuri doesn't sit down, he's bumped into an acquaintance and they chat nearby. Shalva also refuses anything to eat or drink, still plodding up and down.

'Hey kid, you happy now?' Lela asks Irakli, who's munching a cream cake without enthusiasm.

'No,' Irakli answers quietly.

'Don't be a pain in the arse,' Lela laughs and gives him a cuff on the head. Irakli's nose is tipped with a blob of cream. Madonna and Tsitso laugh heartily, but John looks furiously at Lela, like a father seeing his child mistreated.

After the café everybody gathers near the escalator. John and Deborah hug Dali, Tsitso and Lela passionately, and vigorously but remorsefully shake hands with Temuri and Shalva, perhaps because they didn't have the chance to get close enough to either of them in order to warrant a hug. Then Tsitso hugs Irakli, trying to draw it out long enough for the tears to come. After that Madonna also clasps Irakli warmly; he seems worn out by this time. Temuri pats Irakli's shoulder and says sincerely:

‘You know, kid: take it easy!’

Irakli and Lela hug each other, rapidly, without tears, without words.

John takes the handle of his small, wheeled suitcase and goes up the escalator, waving back at the people left below with his broad, heartfelt smile. Irakli and Deborah follow him. Large-boned Deborah steps heavily onto the escalator, her buttocks undulating dramatically as if she might dislocate a hip at any moment, but everything turns out all right in the end and John, Deborah and Irakli are carried upwards.

They are nearly at the top when Irakli suddenly pushes back past Deborah and starts walking down the escalator. Some of the other passengers make worried noises, one young woman even drops her bag.

‘John, John...Irakli, Irakli...’ Deborah’s frightened voice can be heard.

Deborah stands there helplessly, gazing at Irakli’s back as he walks away from her. He weaves in and out of the passengers who are now joining the escalator and jumps off. He passes the group who’d accompanied him as they stand there, astonished, and marches away, walking determinedly who knows where.

‘I think he’s feeling sick...’ Lela says and goes after him.

Tsitso and Madonna seem dumbstruck.

The American couple take the escalator back down to the ground floor, where Tsitso, Madonna and Temuri meet them. John is red in the face and looks offended. Deborah’s pale, her hair mussed.

‘I think he just ran off to the toilet, he’s feeling nauseous,’ Tsitso says, ‘It’s nerves, that’s all.’ Madonna translates, gabbling away in English - presumably to calm John and Deborah down.

‘Let’s move to the side, we’re in the way here,’ Temuri tells the group, who are completely unaware. At this moment the grumpy Shalva suddenly appears out of nowhere, opening his mouth for the first time that day as if this were the right moment to reveal his secret knightly quest.

‘I will go and find them.’ He raises his hefty monobrow, hoists up his trousers, and stalks gravely off into the motley airport crowd.

Lela tracks down the escapee at the entrance to the toilets. Irakli is standing around aimlessly, as if he’s had an attack of amnesia and has no idea who he is, what he wants or what’s just happened.

‘Are you bloody mad?’

Irakli doesn't utter a word.

'Have you been sick?

'No,' says Irakli.

'Then why did you run away, you frightened them all to death... Don't you start messing it all up now, do you understand?' Lela pushes Irakli against the wall and stares into his eyes. 'Let's go now, get a move on, and when you see them, you tell your parents or whoever they are that you're sorry! Do you understand?!

Irakli is silent.

'You idiot, do you understand? Go and puke if you have to, or if not, move, let's go!'

'I don't want to go! I don't want to go to America!' Irakli blurts out bitterly, as though drawing on a fund of bitterness that's been building up for a long time. His face crumples, but no tears come; they seem to be stuck somewhere in his throat, turning to bile.

Lela suddenly lifts her hand and slaps his cheek hard. Irakli's head is knocked against the wall, his knees buckle and he begins to cry. Suddenly John appears from nowhere, grabs Lela by the arm and yanks her towards him with all his might. Lela gazes at John; she can't comprehend what this man wants. John is completely transformed; his open smile, his gentle face are nowhere to be seen... He shakes Lela and yells at her furiously in English.

'What's he want from me?' Lela says and looks at the little crowd, including Madonna who is now frantically trying to pacify John. John lets go of Lela and starts indignantly explaining to Madonna that Lela was beating Irakli up. Enraged, John storms over to Tsitso, pointing at her as though he's now blaming her as well. Tsitso's face is crimson, she's lost for words - then she suddenly puts her head on one side, thrusts her quivering double-chin at him and, as if her patience had finally run out, snaps at John in Georgian,

'I told you you'd run into difficulties taking that gigantic arse anywhere, but you didn't believe me!'

Deborah goes over to Irakli, who sitting on the floor with his head buried in his hands.

'Irakli,' she touches him gently on the arm and kneels down with difficulty.

Deborah signals to Madonna, who bustles over, but she can't kneel down because of her size and she translates for them like that, towering over them.

‘Irakli,’ she asks, ‘is something the matter? Don’t be ashamed if you feel sick, never mind... you just go to the toilet and do what you have to do. Then when you come out, you can have a little rest. If you want, Lela can sit with you, let’s go outside and get a little fresh air. We still have some time-’

Suddenly Irakli raises his head and looks straight at Deborah with his red and tearful eyes. He fixes her with his eyes and shouts, ‘I don’t want to go to America! I don’t want to go to America!’

Madonna is struck dumb. Debora glances up and waits, chin trembling, for her to translate.

‘What did he say? What did he say about America?’

‘Nothing!’ Madonna says firmly and then she begins to scream at Irakli from above, ‘Don’t make me throttle you, you silly boy! Don’t embarrass me in front of these people! Just shut up, get up and go with this woman ... You don’t have to do anything else! You only have to get on the plane and when you get off, you’ll be in an entirely different place, you’ll have a good life... everything... they won’t take you if you resist so badly!’

Irakli suddenly jumps up, yanks his passport wallet over his head and chucks it on the floor like his trump card. Then without saying a word he runs off.

‘What did he say? Doesn’t he want to come with us?’ Deborah tries again to find out.

Temuri gives Deborah a hand up.

‘Calm down, Madame Deborah,’ Temuri tells the tearful woman. Tsitso also catches sight of Temuri stroking the woman’s white plump wrist... Tsitso marches over to Deborah, takes her under the arm, and at the same time glares ferociously at her husband.

‘We’ll sort it out, Deborah,’ Tsitso explains in Georgian again, ‘Please don’t worry... He’s just a child, a brainless child... What does he know about America?’

Then, behind Deborah’s back, Tsitso thrusts her jaw out; she bares her teeth and shakes her fist in front of her husband’s nose and again her eyes flash. As if he’s been caught out in an indiscretion, Temuri shakes his head and awkwardly shuffles aside. But just then he begins to cough, and hunching his shoulders, hawks loudly into his hand for some time.

All the while, Irakli is wandering about aimlessly. All of them - Lela, Madonna, Tsitso and Deborah too – are trying to catch him, but John at that moment with his sparse,

sticking-up hair that looks like he's been electrocuted, stands in front of the women self-importantly.

'Let me do it.' He turns and goes after Irakli with a determined step.

'Irakli,' John catches up with the boy and takes hold of his elbow gently. Irakli wriggles out of his grasp.

'Irakli... we can do it the way you want. If you don't want to come with us, it is OK, we won't be angry. It's up to you.'

Madonna trails after John, her strength flagging as she tries to push past a newly-arrived group of sportsmen. Even in the circumstances, she's still trying to get to Irakli and fulfil her duty as an interpreter properly. 'Irakli, they say whatever you want... if you don't want to come, that's OK. We won't be angry-'

John grabs Irakli's elbow once more and turns the boy to face him. Irakli sees again the old John looking at him, transformed back into the man with the sincere smile and kind gentle face. The only difference is that his hair is standing on end.

'Fuck you, you bastard! I'll kill you! I'll kill you!' Irakli shouts and shakes his arm free of John's powerless hand.

The smile freezes on John's gentle face; he is not yet convinced whether what he just heard was really what was said. At this moment the others catch up with them. Temuri's come to his senses and arrives in the vanguard, then Madonna, Tsitso and Deborah. Irakli stands just in front, as if he's facing a pack of vicious dogs, as if staring them down is less dangerous than turning his back on them.

'Fuck you, you old bastard! I'll kill you! I'll kill you! Don't touch me!' Irakli screams at John. For some reason it reminds Lela of Irakli jumping on the beds in the old bedroom during the spring rain.

Suddenly Deborah goes down like a ninepin. Temuri tries to help her and instead topples over onto the floor with her: underneath Temuri and on the top plump Deborah. When Tsitso sees this she nearly faints too and has to steady herself not to fall down too. John, looking completely deranged, runs over to Deborah.

'Deborah, Deborah,' John goes white.

Shalva and Madonna try to pull Deborah up, while Temuri flaps his arms and legs pathetically. They sit Deborah up on the floor. An elderly woman brings a bottle of water, kneels in front of Deborah and dabs her forehead and ears with her calloused hands.

'She from foreign parts, then?' she asks in her calm Kakhetian accent, giving sips of water to the recovering Deborah.

'Ay-ay, mother, my heart!' Madonna moans, 'God, what sins am I being punished for? Yes, she's a foreigner.'

'She must be feelin' tired... Take her outside, give her a breath of fresh air,' the woman says.

'Where'll you find fresh air round here? All the fresh air is at home in Kardahakhi,' says a middle-aged man, the woman's husband no doubt. 'I reckon you gave her too much to drink and she can't take it anymore.'

Deborah, now revived, is ushered over to a chair.

'You should elevate the legs!' Temuri tries to participate, but meets his wife's beady gaze and says no more.

John holds Deborah's hand and they whisper together.

Lela just waits nearby and watches what's happening. Irakli's there too, he hasn't moved an inch, apparently surprised that he succeeded so easily in scattering the pack of evil dogs that were encircling him just a moment before.

Deborah is the one who is surrounded now, she's being consoled, and the airport hordes flow around her as though they were animals of different breed, who, to Irakli's surprise, have nothing to bark about.

Soon an announcement comes over the tannoy that John and Deborah Sheriffs and Irakli Tskhadadze should immediately proceed to their gate. John helps Deborah to her feet and the couple make their way to the escalator without Irakli. Tsitso, Temuri, Shalva and Madonna follow them, Madonna apologising all the while in English, Tsitso in Georgian, Temuri chucks in some Russian for good measure and pursues Deborah all the way to the escalator with his mournful eyes.

John pauses near the escalator and says goodbye to his hosts once again. Just words this time, no hugs nor handshakes. John apologises to Tsitso and Madonna and says that perhaps they should have spent more time in Georgia and become closer to Irakli, but probably it was better for both sides...

Tsitso feels somebody touching her hand, swivels around and sees Lela in front of her.

'We're going to set off ... we'll get back to the home by ourselves.'

Then Lela looks at Deborah and John, at these two mute creatures standing near the escalator like ruffled birds perched on a wire in the rain, and suddenly speaks to them with unexpected compassion,

'Goodbye John, goodbye Deborah.'