

## Coming in Wheelchair

My God deep inside, both sides of the coin:  
Wheels are my legs, wheelchair's the body,  
Groping through thoughts, unable to join\_  
Whenever the soul is enclosed in rubbles,  
I always have no real preference.  
Planet-size love has made my heart dance:  
Coming in wheelchair! Push ladders past!  
2012

Time spent at the resuscitation ward, connected to the breathing equipment, taught me what it is like to breathe freely. After those six months spent in bed without movement I realized what a happiness it is to finally get up. However, my own legs couldn't bear me and I reentered the world in a wheelchair: The world got divided into ramps and stairs.

I had always led an active lifestyle and soon found my way to the disabled movement. Now I had friends among wheelchair users and had got accustomed to viewing from the bottom upwards.

I often had to come across the unconscious pity of others.

The capital had peeled off its defenseless shabbiness and the past had preserved all the fearful evenings and the dark.

The value of human life had risen. I enjoyed composing poems when I was a little girl and the wheelchair brought back the desire to write again.

I read what I had indicted to Tiko by the phone. Tiko was a pretty girl, running a pretty wheelchair. *I WILL ALSO FLY.*

She liked it.

I kept writing.

Wheelchairs differ: mobile and high-speed ones, jeeps and Ferraris... I'm kidding, of course. A good helmsman can even make his wheelchair go up the stairs.

Seated in a roughrider, I turned out to be lazy enough, always asking others: "Just push me, oh, push me".

Once I wasn't bedridden, I was filled with happiness. The sun was shining above my head, not in the window. I could even drive my car.

There are few disabled persons in our city, who drive cars.

The City Hall registered me and I proudly stuck the Adapted Vehicle and Disabled Parking permit to the car.

I could call anyone in the street: "Excuse me... please take my wheelchair out of the boot". The perplexed passerby would necessarily take out the wheeled chair which I could not accommodate in the passenger compartment.

"Push here and it'll open", I usually said and leaning against the steering wheel sat into the wheelchair.

A wheelchair user doesn't need a bag: nowhere to hang it... Wheelchairs have huge pockets on the back and we can shove everything into them. We must always have wet towels: We often soil our

hands. You must have the phone numbers of the Patrol Police and C.T. Park. If there is a car at the parking lot, you can call them and they'll take it to the impound yard.

You must know which cafes and shops have approach ramps.

We went to Batumi to see the Yacht Championship, all wheelchair users. We wanted pizza. We saw a café with a ramp from afar. I dashed to it and held the top spot, getting in the way of a bewildered waitress who looked down at me.

"A table for six... need no chairs... have come in chairs", I said.

The waitress flung to the heavy wooden chairs and moved them aside, letting us take our places around the table. I felt the gaze of those who'd probably seen wheelchair-users sitting in their wheelchairs all worried and depressed. We were laughing, mostly young. Tiko, a beauty from a fairytale was on the cell phone, talking to someone in English.

"Where is the toilet?" we asked. Fortunately, it was adapted and we all rolled out but the man who'd constructed the toilet hadn't taken into consideration the fact that we generally need taps. They poured some water out of a bottle and we washed hands. An old woman stared at us with a look of pity in her eyes.

"Have you all finished school, children?" she asked.

"Yes, grandma... collages too".

"It's good, it's good", said the woman and we rolled back to have our pizzas.

Goga, a grey-haired handsome man, sits in an automatic wheelchair. He drives us in his minivan. The remote controlled ramp opens and we get into the car. The driver in his automatic wheelchair gets into the hand operated manual transmission car too.

Automatic wheelchairs operate on batteries and need no hands, but it's a costly affair to have a wheelchair of the type.

"Let's go!" calls Goga. "Some wheelchair users are waiting for us at the hotel".

"Do I know them?" I ask, looking into the cell phone.

"I don't think".

The minivan, full of people arguing about music and the remote control, approached the hotel.

Some wheelchair-users were drinking their coffee in the lobby. All strangers and older than me. One of them caught my attention: a tattooed man with an earring and his hair drawn back in a ponytail (a man, you see). I liked him and rolled my wheelie jeepney closer.

Data was very smart, a gifted artist and an absolute erudite. We talked till late at night. Argued about books and agreed about our common problems.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"A bullet..." he answered in a quiet voice, making me remember the bullets of my childhood.

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April 9, 1989.

Tbilisi.

Protesters called for independence from the USSR.

I'm just a girl and cannot understand why the people at the rally have been massacred. Together with my family I watch TV to see a man beating a tank with a flag handle. I laughed a ringing laughter. My father shouted at me and I skulked out of the room, crestfallen.

And that old woman in the bus, asking:

"What's going on? Why are they killing us?"

Oh, how they pounced on her, raising a true hue and cry, trying to explain something, all mentioning freedom.

“We call for freedom. That’s why they kill us”, bawled a swarthy youngster and since then the word FREEDOM has been stamped in my soul.

“Is USSR something bad?” I asked the most talkative teacher at school, who always used to hold forth on Lenin and the Communist Party.

“Can it be good? We’ve been calling for freedom. Their time has passed”.

“But you said communism...”

“Go to the classroom and guard your tongue”, she said, rolling her eyes.

I was confused and obedient.

Then I asked my father:

“What freedom is like?”

His opinion was always weighty.

“...you depend upon nobody, decide how to live...”

“Why did they kill people at the rally?”

“They were calling for Georgia’s independence from the USSR”.

“Is USSR something bad?”

“It’s bad”.

“Then why the teachers were always saying it was great? Those songs... those books about heroes who fought during the Patriotic War...”

He was deep in thoughts. Now I know how difficult it was to explain too many things.

“You’ll understand when you grow up”.

No child would ever like an answer like that. I believed I was big enough and felt hurt.

“Am I free, father?”

“Of course, you’re”, he stroke my hair gently.

Next day I went to school, crossed out all pictures of Lenin, tore my red scarf, dragged the Soviet History book out of the bookcase and hurled it out of the window”.

Trembling all over, the old teacher was about to punish me. His name was Khariton.

“What do you think you are doing? They’d shoot you in the past...”

“I’m free”, I said, thumping my chest proudly, unable to apprehend that the massacre of Georgians was a war. 1990s.

I’d read about facts of heroic self-sacrifice, about battles...

“Mothers sacrificed their children to the country. Will you ever sacrifice me?” I asked my mum.

“Don’t talk nonsense”, was her incensed answer.

“Do those books lie?”

She said nothing. The same question made my father fidget.

“It was a different story, a different reality”.

“And if it were a different reality...”

“I’d never sacrifice you to anyone”, he admitted.

“Even to the country...”

“I’ll sacrifice myself, but will never sacrifice you”.

The unheroic attitude of my parents disappointed me.

During Tbilisi war my father was missing for two days and I realized what the horror of a war was like, the power of expectation and ignorance. They'd been taking home the dead. He'd been looking for his friend shot in a car throughout morgues.

"There's a fratricidal war on Rustaveli Avenue. There're fires on one single street, but in other districts restaurants are full of feasters", he told my mother.

Mkhedrioni made an incursion into Samegrelo region, looting, burning, killing and robbing.

We heard dreadful news: A mother and a daughter were raped, a family was burnt alive and killers got off scot-free. It was an outrageous breach of all limits.

"I need a gun. I want to fight", I said.

"You're a girl", I was answered flatly.

It isn't easy to be a girl. Girls are forbidden to sling rifles over their shoulders and stroll about. Girls must stoop quietly and that's all.

The leader of Mkhedrioni Jaba Ioseliani and his myrmidons often appeared on TV. I knew them by sight and I hated them for humiliating my nation. I hated them for the years of terror and wished they'd fall into my hands to deal shortly with them. I was comfortable with all the thoughts about death: my heart was charged with hatred.

Late night robberies turned into something usual.

We were hungry, cold and almost barefoot.

I still see the nightmare of my childhood: Looking for a pair of shoes to go to school; never able to pair any of the shoes I found.

My father left Georgia to make some money.

We had three guns at home: a double-barrel, a single-barrel and an air rifle. My elder brother kept the TOZ by his head, the younger slept with the air rifle by his side and I always put the single-barrel near my cushion. We all were straight shooters.

We didn't light oil lamps. Our uncle had warned us:

"Don't panic. If you hear noise, just lie down and shoot. I'll come".

We live in a detached house and share the yard with our uncle.

We all slept on the second floor, in dark and cold rooms. I heard somebody entered the bathroom on the first floor. I had to fire my gun against the floor above the place from where the noise was coming and crawl to the stone wall. It was going to be a fight for life.

I was so scared that I failed to make even a move. I wrapped my head in a blanket and exhausted by the fear which traitors usually experience waited for the offender. Time stood still.

It was a horrible morning. I went down to the bathroom and kicked a dog out of it, with that trembling gun in my hand. I called the dog names for he'd frightened my wits.

Then my father returned, with not much money... He had walked twenty kilometers to get home.

At night I heard my parents' whispered conversation.

"Mkhedrioni fighters kidnapped a twelve-year-old girl, raped her and bashed up her brother. The girl is missing. Maybe they've killed her or have been torturing her", said my father.

Horried I wished I could kill that man or the leader of Mkhedrioni himself.

Watching their faces appearing on the screen of the 12V TV, I wished I could have some magical power and day by day turned myself into a reserved adolescent.

Student days: Darkness and unexpected stops in wintry underground tunnels were part and parcel of 1990s.

Wet feet in December, January and February: All three months spent in blankets. Awakenings of frosty air in steam, the smell of kerosene and the uproar that shattered buildings when power supply resumed...

Tbilisi, ashy and dirty, throbbing with frowned, suspicious and gloomy faces\_

Students usually gathered at the Public Library: It was warm there. We used to whip round, five Tetris each, bought a loaf of Georgian bread and ate it together. It was a rule: You had to come home until it got dark. Otherwise you'd be robbed. The feeling of being unprotected and exposed to danger darkened our yeasty years. We starved, we were cold, and we were scared.

The dream of my childhood to kill a member of Mkhedrioni turned into a bitter reminiscence which sometimes made me smile. I still hate winter: A true specimen of those 1990s. Years went by. Jaba Ioseliani wrote some books and managed to die without me helping him to die. Most members of Mkhedrioni also died. Now life was humming in the city with the population of one and a half million: No cracks in the pavement, no blocks of flats plunged in darkness. Tbilisi, our beautiful city, shined brightly...

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"What happened then?" I ask Data.

"I survived, survived and changed... became an artist\_ what happened to you?"

"It was an accident".

"Driving at high revs?"

"No, another driver ran into a share taxi, crossed into oncoming traffic and overturned right onto my car".

"Any chances to walk again?"

"Yes. Have you got the chance too?"

"No chances. I don't feel bad in my wheelchair".

"I want to walk", Tiko broke in. She is so beautiful.

"We don't feel bad in our wheelchairs", laughs Rati. He's buzzed a bit.

In the morning we boarded several different yachts. Rati tried to gain the lead but my yacht was the first one to arrive in Poti. He was in the pouts but finally I succeeded in making up with him.

We spent three days side by side and we became good friends. Data even offered to tattoo me. On the last day, we decided to have a party. Someone mentioned Mkhedrioni there. I wheeled away from the table and looked at the sea. Then I turned back and said:

"Mkhedrioni\_ What are you talking about? I hate them all".

The people at the table kept silent. It was disturbing.

"Do you hate them so much that you're capable of killing any of those men?" smiled Data.

"Capable of mothering them single-handedly..."

"Maybe they've changed".

"I don't think so".

"Maybe you're going to change yourself".

"Never", I replied, feeling outraged.

The driver of our minivan poured Data some wine and, eager to change the subject, raised his glass in a toast. Lured by the breeze, I wheeled to the sandy beach and took delight in listening the splashing water. In the end, Rati danced, in his wheelchair, and we flew sky lanterns. The next day

we all left for Tbilisi. I put the photos of the Yacht Championship on the Internet but a friend of mine called me and said:

“Have you gone mad? I mean those pictures taken with Data Lanchava, Jaba Ioseliani’s right hand...”

“What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t recognize him... Now he wears his hair long and looks thinner. A wheelchair and tattoos\_ They say he’s an artist now... Haven’t you heard? He has raped a twelve-year-old girl...”

“Yes, I’ve heard about the girl but I didn’t recognize him. Maybe he hasn’t committed the crime?”

“I don’t know, but they say it’s true\_ He was a killer and a drug-abuser\_ Or do you think it was a slander too”.

Those words made me lose my tongue. I deleted the post and felt really bad, now realizing what really happened there at Batumi party.

A week later, Data called me and invited me to his new exhibition. I came but I don’t know why I did so... I looked for him among the guests and finally saw him. Oh, that lost childhood hissing inside me... He smiled with all his heart.

“Hey, come and look at a picture of yours, the Championship...”

Failing to utter a word, I approached him. He was wearing a bandana.

“What’s up?” he asked already aware that something had changed.

I silently looked at the picture which depicted the awarding ceremony.

“Nothing”

“Do you want this picture?”

“Doesn’t it belong to the exhibition?”

“I’ll steal it for you”.

I don’t know how he managed to make off with such a big picture from an overcrowded place like the exhibition hall, but it was waiting for me at the car\_ I kept silent again: I couldn’t talk. I neither hated him anymore nor wanted his death. I wanted to believe that he had changed together with the life in our country\_ Data was an artists who had stolen an exhibit for me and I was a child of the 1990s who couldn’t hate. I got into the driving seat. Somebody helped me to put my wheelchair and the big picture into the car. *Do you hate them so much that you’re capable of killing any of those men? Capable of smothering them single-handedly... Maybe they’ve changed. I don’t think so. Maybe you’re going to change yourself.*

The capital celebrated Tbilisoba Festival. All those colorful and crunchy leaves in autumn\_ A police cruiser rolled past me. Rustaveli Avenue was full of passersby so differing from one another. No traces of blood and war\_ I parked my rugged Mercedes at a special lot\_

“Sorry, wheelchair-users park their vehicles here”, a stranger dashed to me.

“I am a wheelchair-user. Take out my wheelchair from the boot, please”, I said and leaning against the steering wheel sat into the wheelchair. Then I locked the car and went to April 9 Memorial. It reminded me of my deceased parents, of what happened long ago.

*Am I free, father? Of course, you are\_*

I smiled.

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Sitting in a wheelchair is more than wheeling up and down. Once you solve a problem you realize that something else is amiss. I don’t know what would be better, to start from the beginning or from

the very end. *The very end*\_ a nice expression\_ Today, I'm going to attend a lecture on sex issues. No, I have nothing in common with any of the lecherous sects. It's an official training course financed by the State itself. When you have a spinal injury a part of your body is paralyzed and feels nothing from the waist down or, maybe, from the shoulders down. It depends upon the diagnosis. That's why a neophyte wheelchair-user has to travel different paths. Today is the first training day and I'm worried: What if the coach is going to give me a question and make a fool of me? Last year I travelled to Ukraine, to take exercises and to be able to go to the toilet all by myself.

The rehabilitation course was financed by a certain NGO. The coach singled me out and made me share my experience with the group once a week. I had to talk about the result of the therapy, the achievements. There was nothing pleasant in rattling out what a success it was to really piss instead of doing number one in the diaper and to have back the sensation of an overfilled urinary bladder. There was nothing pleasant in talking about how frequently I used to do number two. I hope the sex teacher won't notice me today. I feel shy and I don't like discussions of the type. And what am I going to talk about? I have nothing to say\_ Oh, it was a mistake to decide to attend the training. I'd better take some exercises. I poured some boiling water over prunes, two third of a glass. I'll drink it when it gets cold. It's good for my stomach, it helps digestion. I don't want to see those proctologists. Who would ever like to put off her panties before a proctologist? Once he poked into a different place and all by mistake. Unwilling to have my cherry broken by his rubber glove, I prefer to simply follow his instructions. Permanent exercises kill me, but rehabilitation centers cost much. Lying down on the bed I try to do exercises at home.

But I hate exercises, I hate them. I tumble down on the bed and don't move. I'd like to have a robot which will come and make me do my exercises\_ Where the hell is that phone ringing? Oh, it's on the floor. I can reach for it and fall down by its side\_ It's my life, my lonely life\_ My dog is out or he'd bring me the phone. He has just been scratching at the door. I'll close the door. It would serve him right. I need him so much and he's straying somewhere outside. I carefully reached for the phone with a stick and moved it closer. Then I grasped it with two of my fingers and answered.

"Ella, I don't like your voice", said Data.

"I've just taken the phone from the floor".

"I hope you haven't broken anything".

"No".

"You'd know. You can have some pain sensations".

"Yes, I'd know about a fracture".

"I didn't feel anything even when my appendix was ruptured. I almost died because it was too late when I came to the hospital. When I felt sick I thought it was intoxication".

"When did that happen?"

"Two years ago. Are you going to attend the training?"

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"No, I mean you've been a wheelchair-user for a long time. Isn't the course meant for the inexperienced ones?"

"I'm the coach".

"You're a man".

"And what?"

"They said men train men and women train women."

“Who said? I took a three-month course in polite training. I was happy when I saw your name in the list. I’m nervous. I’ve never taught anyone and it would be nice to have somebody I already know in the group. You’ll help me”.

“OK”. The news about the prospect of being trained by a friend confused me.

“See you soon”.

“Data!”

“What?”

“Don’t ask me about sex, please”, I begged and felt that my ears were burning.

“I wasn’t going to”.

“God bless you!” What’s this world coming to? Today a man will give me a lesson on sex.

Something scratched at the door again. It was Brody, my clever shepherd.

“Oh, Brody, bring me my trousers”.

The dog opens the closet and puts his muzzle on the trousers, letting me choose.

“Yes, that’s it. Bring it here”.

There are some stains of saliva on the trousers but that isn’t a problem. I don’t like wearing trousers much, but they are comfortable. Can I wear a dress? Once, sporting a white skirt, I tuned over together with my wheelchair. Thank God I didn’t need diapers then. The fact that I was wearing pretty panties cheered me up. Everyone by my side was sitting in a wheelchair and I had to scream and yell until a walking passerby helped me.

I keep all my sneakers at the wall.

“My sneakers, Brody”, I call and the dog stops at each pair to let me chose again. I chose the third one and say:

“Brody, go to the kitchen and eat”.

He’s happy. He knows that we’re going for a walk. A shepherd must consume his energies. I often tie him to the car and drive at a very low speed. Brody runs and consumes his energies. I cannot run. Staring down at the sneakers I realize that they look brand-new. How can one wear his shoes out if his feet, his legs never move? I put the key, the wallet and the mobile phone in the back pocket of my wheelchair. At least the elevator is in good order.

“Brody, get in”. He doesn’t like elevators and I don’t like loneliness. Sometimes I think what I am going to do if the power goes out and that’s why I keep a diaper in the back pocket. I deeply honor the one who sewed that big pocket on the back of my wheelchair where I can shove everything. I approach the car and look around. I need a young man to help me with the wheelchair. Then I see a strolling couple and say:

“Oh, I’m sorry. Would you put the wheelchair into the car please?”

They came closer and leaning against the steering wheel I get in.

“Can we do something else for you?”

“Push there to fold it please. Brody, come in”.

The dog jumps onto the front seat and the boy folds the wheelchair. I thank the boy when he finally puts the wheelchair into the boot and take off. I like driving. It makes me happy. Hand steering makes me free. The noisy music takes my sorrow away, takes me away from the humdrum routine. Brody is looking out of the window. He’s happy and I’m happy too: No one is going to fine me because my passenger hasn’t buckled himself up.

We’re going to be trained at a place which has already been adapted to our wheelchairs. I ordered the dog to stay in the car. I know he’s clever and will never go. My heart is throbbing. I neither want



to be the first one to enter the room nor to be the last one to come in rattling and get trapped in cables. I don't want everyone to gape at me.

"Hello, Ella", smiles Tamuna, a skinny girl from Bazaleti.

"Are you one of the coaches?"

"No, my physician said it would be good for me to attend. Data is the couch".

"How are you?"

"I'm OK now, but I was ill for two weeks. We are not the people of sound health you know. If we don't take care of ourselves, even a cold can finish us".

"You're right. I remember Tiko. She burnt her skin with a cup of coffee and had to undergo such a long course of treatment".

"Oh, when?"

"She's still been applying compresses to her thigh... She put a cup of steaming coffee in the lap and felt nothing until the skin began to sizzle".

"It's terrible. Dachi was subject to an operation. He had pressure ulcers you see" \_

"Wasn't it possible to do without an operation?"

"No, to avoid infection" \_

All of a sudden Data approached us. Goodness gracious! There was nothing in his appearance what would remind you of a gunman from TV.

"Hey, ladies, I'm glad to see you here. What are you talking about?"

"About Dachi and his pressure ulcers" \_

"Yeah, they appear in the soft tissues, especially where we cannot see them. The skin dies off, decays and causes serious problems. They've already cut off half of my bottom because of those sores. I'm going to have it silicone-filled. It's not easy to..."

We burst into laughter.

"Believe me it's not easy to sit like this. I never sit straight", protests Data against our giggling.

"Make the other side a bit thinner too", I advise.

"It's impossible for a lean one like me" \_

"The tattoo is really good". I kept my eyes on the new picture on his fingers.

"I've offered to make one for you but you never agree" \_

"What am I going to do if I get bored with it?"

"I'll make one on your ear. You'll never see it".

"I'll think about it".

"We're going to start in half an hour", said data and moved in the direction of the administration.

I cannot feel my legs or, to be more precise, there is a poor contact between my legs and my brain. I can feel the upper part of my thighs but never feel the lower one. I was twenty-seven when I became a wheelchair-user and since then, for six years, I've been stuck between operations and rehabilitation courses. What am I talking about? It's so hard to confess but my personal experience consists of nothing but a few occasions of foolish flirtation, a stupid kiss of a drunken college mate and unanswered likings. I've never been a beauty but I've never been ugly too. During those six years I liked all handsome physicians I met and believed that all males in white coats devoted much of their attention to me. Now I know I just wanted it to be true. They were kind to me out of pity: I was young, I had suffered much and I looked weepy.

