

Asynchrony

So now no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

Paul's Epistle to the Romans, 7:17

Part One

The postman was ringing the doorbell when Rostom arrived home.

'Oh, you're back, are you? I was about to leave,' he said as Rostom came out of the lift. He asked him to sign for a letter and went down the stairs.

The letter was from the hospital. He glanced through it. "Concerning expenses incurred by your children... Payment is compulsory..."

He stopped reading. He didn't have any children. He turned the paper over and read the last sentence: "Our sincere condolences..."

'What the hell's this about?' he muttered, looking down the stairwell. The postman was nowhere to be seen.

Indoors, clothes lay on the chairs in dusty heaps. His shelves were stuffed with tatty books; in the squalid kitchen, dirty cups without handles and chipped plates were piled high. A large black-and-white photo of his mother hung on the wall. Rostom went to put the letter down on a shelf, but instead chucked it in the bin. He switched on the TV and put a pan of leftover fried potatoes from the day before on the cooker. On the news there was something about a circus that was closing down.

He took a bottle of sauce out of the fridge and poured some vodka into a glass. The words 'funeral expenses for your children' drifted back to him from the letter. He looked up at his mother's photo and shook his head. She gazed down at him with her sad eyes... or so it seemed to Rostom. Whenever the thought of selling the house crossed his mind, he avoided meeting her eye. He didn't dare take it down. He was ashamed even to think of taking her picture down.

Diana's Diary

6 March

Lina has this habit that I can't stand. She fills up a bowl with water, dunks her head in it and stays under. She says she's resting like that – or is she thinking - I can't remember... anyway, she says it's fun... and then she blows bubbles. She splashes me. Then she comes up, takes a breath and does it all over again ... Once I tried it. We have the same horoscope, you'd think we'd like the same things... but no way, it's crap! I don't like her copying me either... she's always trying to

look at my diary. I have the feeling she'll start writing her own diary soon. She can start, who cares – I know she'll give it a go soon.

When she puts her face underwater, she makes her hair wet too. I keep telling her not to get her hair wet but she doesn't understand. Then it takes her hours to dry it..

Whereas I just scribble away, I don't bother anyone. When she cuts pictures out of magazines for her scrapbook, I don't object. If she wants she can cut up all the magazines we've got ... I don't care!

I found this note book in my grandmother's wardrobe. When I'm writing it feels as though I'm somehow more alive, my life seems more important. So far I've only done one page, but I've written lots more in my mind. I have so many ideas ... I'll write them all down gradually. There should be proof somewhere that you exist, that you are real. Time goes by and then we'll vanish and nobody will know anything about us . We don't even have a picture of ourselves, not a single one. Everyone has a picture of themselves except us, I reckon. Probably no one would miss us. Although what has missing us got to do with anything? Why am I talking like Gran? She talks like that... apparently it's the way things are done "outside". Very strange, confusing rules they seem to have out there. When to be sad, when to laugh- not that we really know anything about their real lives. TV is our only window onto the outside, TV and Zaza.

... but what is the point of people mourning for us? Maybe it would make more sense to mourn over our life, not our death. Oh God, I'm sounding like Gran again....

9 March

I write to exist. I've said that already, haven't I? But I have no idea why I should exist. There's no way out of it, that's why. I am, in other words we are. This "we are" is the reason for everything. The words stick to my tongue like leeches and I can't get rid of them. I can't speak in the singular - those words won't allow me to be alone, they won't let me live.

Sometimes everything's so pointless.

Occasionally I wake up earlier than Lina and somehow I'm just so happy for those few minutes. It feels as though the only time I really live is during those minutes. And in my diary.

Rostom was the first to get to work, as usual. The cleaner was bustling about in the corridor. A window was open in the Faculty common room and a breeze rustled the previous day's newspapers on the table. "21st Century Freaks or Slaves? Circus Director wanted for exploitation."

He flicked through the pages indifferently.

After lectures were over, his workmates bought some salami, bread and vodka from the shop, locked the common room door and started eating and drinking toasts. They joked, boasting about what a good time they could have at their University, unlike at the stricter establishments where boozing was forbidden.

Rostom staggered home, his mind a blank and his head spinning. Before going to bed he made a pile of the dirty laundry he was going to take to his aunt's the following day. At that moment a neighbour knocked on the door and announced that the postman had left another letter for Rostom.

'Since when have I been getting all these letters?' Rostom snapped. Recognising the envelope, he tried not to take it, saying it was some kind of mistake.

'I dunno ...' The woman shrugged her shoulders, shoved the letter into his hand and turned away.

"Compulsory payment of costs incurred by your children ..." - Rostom sighed, - "you are requested to come to the above address" - he slammed the door. Before the letter landed in the bin he caught a few more words: "It is your duty to pay for storage of the dead"...

Diana's Diary

9 March

I hate March. The wind is almost blowing us away. The walls are shaking. I hate everything today, including the house. Gran's watching her soap opera; she wouldn't let us turn over to the film. Lina's a moron too; she didn't say a word. How can they watch this nonsense?! It's the same thing over and over again. If you ask Gran, she says soaps are rubbish, but when it comes down to it, you can't tear her away from the screen. I'm sick of it!

Thank God I have a diary! It's the only thing that's mine. It's the only place I'm able to be myself... say anything I want, not leave anything out ... Nobody will abuse me here, nobody will interfere... nobody will stop me from doing anything, nobody will hurt me. Here I'll be able to say 'I am doing this', not 'we are doing'; 'I want', not 'we want'... here I'll be alone, alone, alone.

'Let's drink to mutual understanding! To close friends who really understand each other... Death's better than loneliness, man! Let my enemy be alone!'

In the Faculty common room, a few late-night boozers were clinking their glasses together.

‘Yup, we Georgians have a saying – “A man who eats alone is a sorry sort of man...”’ they were agreeing with each other. ‘Very true, very true...’

Rostomi shook his head, listening to them. Their conversation, strangely, began to mirror his own thoughts.

‘For a man like you, being alone, what kind of life is that... you’ll never be alone, mate, while we’re with you... but a good man is wasted without a nice woman and children at home...’

At the mention of children, Rostom hazily recalled the letters and winced, as if the word scorched his throat worse than vodka.

Diana’s Diary

March, 11

When Zaza brought us a handbag Gran muttered to herself, why do they need that? It’s made of multi-coloured oil-cloth. We don’t go anywhere, I guess she’s right - why do we need a bag? But I felt upset by her remarks.

We put some things in it: a beautiful handkerchief, lipstick, hair clips, and some lollipops, and we hung it on the mirror. When I’m in a bad mood sometimes I take it off and look at the things. But sometimes it just irritates me even more. It’s from there too, from “outside!” and it reminds me all the time that we’ll never be able to go there. Our place isn’t there. We have to stay here, by the two trees and the river, tied with an invisible rope, waiting for Gran’s pension and Zaza.

And this place appears to be cursed in some way, it seems to have been left off all the maps, it doesn’t even merit a tiny dot ... Well, it’s definitely not on our maps, we’ve got two of them up on the wall. They cover the cracks and keep the draughts out a bit too.

All this scares me sometimes. Lina just bursts into tears and then she calms straight back down again. Everything’s simple for Lina, she cries and then she feels fine. I can’t be like that... I’m too ashamed to cry. I’m ashamed of how we are. Sometimes I feel like I’m going crazy ... why has it turned out like this? Why us?

Diana’s diary

13 March

Here we go, I told you! Lina made me look for some paper, she wants to write a diary too. We found an old note-book in the drawer. There isn't any other paper left. First she fussed around, then she tore out the written pages and cleaned it up ...I wonder what she's going to write. She's trying to hide it from me, she wants to do it behind my back. The way we are, Lina has the left hand.

Lina's diary

Thirteenth of March

Two plaits, two hats... one silver leaf necklace... that's us. I am the one on the left.

My sister won't let me read her diary. That's why I'm hiding mine too, although what do I have to hide from her? One day I'll see it anyway, I'll read it secretly. What's she writing about? Perhaps she's written some poems and she's not sure yet if they are good or not. If so I won't be cross. I've always wanted to write poems... not about love. I've never been in love. I'd write a poem about my father and my dead mother... I don't know much about them either. But I'd make up something. They do sort of exist for me, my mother-picture and my imaginary father.

I would write about us too. Two hearts, two mouths, two souls... that's how I'd start. Then what? I don't know. I don't have any talent for it.

I suddenly had a thought - two mouths means we are two-faced! And two hearts means treachery in Georgian! Horrible words! I wonder how it sounds in other languages. I don't like it in our language, it's horrendous ...

Two souls means pregnant in Georgian as well.

There's no place for us anywhere, we don't make sense in any language...

What about two heads? Two-headed... Oh God...

I don't know what to write, this diary is stupid. It's poisoning my mind. Sometimes I think that it is better not to think at all.

What is my sister writing so much about? That's what I keep wondering ...

I'm going to start my scrapbook again. Since Diana started her diary, she hasn't been helping me at all, she's got no time for me. It makes it so difficult to do the cutting out, I can't manage it.

In the morning Rostom caught a powerful smell of perfume, at once sweet and acrid. The image of a woman flashed through his mind involuntarily. By the time he reached the first floor he had had enough time to imagine the slim body, slightly rounded shoulders, clear, pale skin and attractive, elongated face. Elegant fingers. That was the sort of woman who smelt like that...

It was noisy in the Faculty. The secretary was making coffee for the lecturers. The door opened, a student looked shyly around and asked Rostom: "May I come in?" Rostom gave the tall, fragile girl a severe glance. He took the sheets of paper from her absently, without breaking off his conversation.

'Why are you so tough on that girl, she's not bad at all, is she?' One of his colleagues asked as soon as she left.

'Am I tough on her?' Rostom was confused. 'I'm asking her to do her homework, does that make me tough?' He looked down at the papers. 'Do you know her?'

'No, not particularly ... I am just saying she's a nice girl, bright. I taught that class last year and she stuck in my mind...'

Rostom looked down at the register. The students' grades were listed beside their surnames. Her marks were low. She'd already retaken her course work twice. He pondered. For some reason, he couldn't remember why, he had an unpleasant association with that girl... Her long neck, arched eyebrows and elongated, slim face lingered in his imagination, a face than could have been drawn by an expressionist.

Diana's diary

16 March

Elene's picture gets on my nerves. When I wake up I see it straight away and each time it is as if it's hammering nails into my head. Her long face and her curved eyebrows... I know who she looks like! We had a picture like her on the calendar once.

My mother must be about our age in the photo, or a bit older. What does she care?! She died without even seeing us. Our father hasn't seen us either. He's not dead, but what difference does that make? He couldn't give a shit about us.

It's not just that he doesn't give a shit, he wishes we didn't even exist. Does anyone want us? Who needs us around? This is not just me feeling sorry for myself, I am trying to make sense of it all ... I have a right, don't I? I have a right to know why I was born, and when all this will end.... I wish I could at least know what's in store for Lina and me... will we be here all the time? Like this all the time? I get so depressed when I think about the future.

It wasn't so bad when we were little. Sometimes we were even happy in those days. Now and again something nice would happen, just once in a while ... Zaza would bring some chocolate from town or Gran would bake a cake, something just a bit better than usual, a little taste of joy... But these little treats aren't enough for me anymore, they don't make me happy. There's not enough space for me here in this tiny, crappy room, crumbling all around us ... I am so sick of everything – and even more sick of nothing. Our lives are nothing.

Why did Elene have us? Why aren't people more thoughtful? Why do they live like animals? Were Lina and I ever asked whether we wanted to live? Who forced us to live this nightmare?

Lina's diary

Seventeenth of March

Apparently some girls keep a friendship diary. I read it in an interview. They write down questions and answers - what do you love, what do you dream about, which writers do you like, etc. I'd like to have a diary like that too, but who would fill in the answers? Perhaps Diana's thinking the same. I'd be happy to fill hers in, although I don't know what I'd say.

- What do you want from life?
- What do you love doing?
- What do you hate? What irritates you?
- What do you want to be when you grow up?
- What do you do in your free time?
- Which painters do you like? Which writers? Actors?
- What is your dream?

I don't know what I want. For some reason I suddenly want to be asked the questions they ask celebrities in magazines, and for my answers to be published. 'Lina loves this. Lina dreams of this... Lina is like this or that. Lina gives a little laugh ... Lina prefers not to answer this question...' Then they could interview my sister too and write about her. Diana is a completely different character; despite the fact that they are twins, they are quite unlike. That's why they sometimes squabble, and yet they love each other so much, they can't live without each other!

I love meat. When Gran gets her pension Zaza brings us some meat and cheese, enough to last us for a couple of days. I always love the day Zaza comes. The things he brings have a particular smell. Sometimes he even gives us some chocolate, I think he buys it with his own money. I love new magazines too, and the brochures he occasionally brings, I love looking at them. Their pages also have a strange smell, a city smell. Our birthday is lovely, Gran bakes a cake for us every year. She gives us things like hair clips and clothes. Once she gave us shampoo, it smelt heavenly. It foamed up so easily and made our hair as soft as anything...

Another time Zaza brought a bubble blower. It was great. My sister and I had a competition over who could blow the biggest bubble, and whose bubble would last the longest ... we laughed so much! Diana couldn't work it at the beginning and she was cross. I was dying with laughter! When the liquid ran out, Gran didn't let us use washing-up liquid. It didn't work with ordinary

soap at all. Later we secretly sneaked some, a tiny bit at a time so that she wouldn't notice, and we blew rainbow bubbles in the back yard.

I'll tell you what I can't bear: I can't bear digging in the garden. I prefer to do the washing up and the laundry. I can't stand it when Gran snores, or when she moans about her aches and pains. Such a dreary noise, it drives me mad. I want to block my ears.

Profession – I want to be a fashion designer, I could make beautiful dresses, like the ones in magazines. We have to alter our T-shirts all the time anyway. We wear normal skirts and trousers, but we have to alter all our tops. If I were a designer I'd make beautiful dresses first for us, and then for other people. I would dress ladies; I'd choose the colours and the patterns myself as well.

In my free time I go diving. I put my head underwater, into a different world. I used to be scared to open my eyes but now I've learnt how to. I don't even hold my nose now, I put my ears underwater too, and I blow bubbles. I can stay under for a long time without needing to take a breath. There are painted flowers on the bottom of the bowl. Everything looks different, blurry. Sounds can hardly reach me there. I can only hear the noises my body is making. It seems as though I'm hearing the blood whooshing in my veins and my heart beating. My sister is constantly arguing with me about it, she says 'stop ducking all the time.' I like it, I just stick my head underwater and I am somewhere else, in a peaceful place.

I also like looking through magazines, cutting out pictures and collecting them, and now I've started writing a diary.

My dream is to be free. I thought a lot about this question before I answered it. If they ask me what freedom is, I can't really say, but I can describe sort of how I imagine it.

Perhaps freedom is like the exact moment when I go underwater... while I still have enough air in my lungs not to have to take a breath. At that moment I feel that I am Lina, not Diana's twin sister, not an orphan, not Zaza's relative, but just Lina... Lina, nothing more.

Now I'm tired, and my hand is too.

Diana's Diary

19 March

I was about to take Elene's picture down from the wall when Lina started wrestling with me. Gran had gone to pick up her pension or she would have helped Lina. I managed to get it down, although she wouldn't let me put it away in a drawer. She left it out on the table. Now there is a pale square on the wall, an empty square of light. I prefer to stare at this stain rather than at Elene's smile. I couldn't stand her blasé expression.

Although Mum was beautiful. I look like her.

The telephone rang just as Rostom was saying goodbye to his colleagues at the end of the day. A member of staff winked at him.

‘A woman’s asking for you,’ he said. Nobody ever phoned Rostom at work. Surprised, he took the receiver.

‘Are you Rostom Morchiladze?’

‘Yes?’

‘Mr. Morchiladze, our condolences...’

‘What?’ Rostom froze.

‘You’ve received our letter, haven’t you? If you don’t want to pay the morgue fees for storing the body – sorry, the bodies – you’ll have to come here anyway... You have to make a statement to the effect that you relinquish your rights to your children’s corpses ...’

‘You must have the wrong number!’ Rostom snapped.

‘Are you Mr Rostom Morchildaze?’ the voice repeated indifferently.

‘Which Rostom do you want? I don’t have any children!’ Rostom raised his voice.

‘Excuse me...’ She covered the receiver with her hand and he heard an exchange between two people, although he couldn’t make out the words. ‘You can request a DNA test, if you want-’

‘Listen, who are you after? Who gave you this number? How did you get hold of my address? Explain to me what’s going on...’

Drops of sweat gathered on Rostom’s forehead. He hung up and looked around at his co-workers, blushing.

‘They’re crazy, the fuckers!’ He wiped his face with his handkerchief and left the room.

‘Is everything all right?’ the others called after him.

The girl from yesterday was in the corridor. He felt so disorientated that he couldn’t even remember whether he’d talked to her that day or not. He averted his eyes as she passed.

Diana’s diary.

29 March

We have run out of pads. And there's not much soap left either.

When I had my...when we had our first period, I had no idea what it was and I was terrified. I woke up Lina and she nearly had a heart attack. Gran, of course, didn't explain anything. After a bit we got used to it, and we realised that what the TV ads were about. We were too embarrassed to ask Zaza to buy us STs. We tore up sheets and stuffed them with cotton wool or toilet paper... Finally we did put pads on the shopping list. Since then he has brought them every time.

If it wasn't for books, magazines and TV we would have no idea about anything. Gran gets grumpy, she says why do we need all these magazines, why do we make her waste money on them, but Lina's crazy about them. She'd rather starve than go without them.

Thank goodness Gran taught us to read and write. She was probably born to teach us to read and write. Although perhaps, if it wasn't for Gran, our lives would have been different... Perhaps we wouldn't have lived like this, like prisoners. Perhaps we could have seen what it's like outside. What is it that's so frightening out there? Loads of times I've thought about asking Zaza to take us with him. "We'll come with you to the shop - we won't get out of the car, we'll stay there and wait for you if you want us to." And every time, just as I am about to ask him, I freeze up. Maybe my whole life will slide past without me managing to ask him... And would he even take us? Probably not.

Lina's diary

Twenty-second of March.

I can already stay underwater without breathing for more than a minute... I love being in the water. I'd like to dive with my whole body, but I've only seen swimming pools and sea on TV. I'm always so jealous of people in swimming costumes jumping, diving and swimming in the water. I want to go to a lake or to the sea so much... I long to be in the water! I have the feeling that I'd just jump straight into the water and swim. I somehow think I know how to swim already. My sister can rely on me- I'll do the swimming.

IwanttobeinthewaterIwanttobeinthewaterIwanttobeinthewater....

Water, for me, is like the mirror for Alice. I step into a different world. The others don't understand, they are always moaning about it. Why does it matter to Gran, anyway? I'm not doing anyone any harm, am I? The water takes me away, to another place... a place which isn't necessarily any better than here, but at least it's completely different.

Rostom's neighbour took his blood pressure and gave him some medicine.

‘You should take care of yourself, you look awful.’

She put the blood pressure machine back in its case and stood up.

‘I know Mzia, I know... I should cut back on my drinking...’

‘Quite right, Rostom, you should... Alcohol won’t solve your problems, and besides, you’ll make yourself ill. Worrying won’t change anything.’

Rostom felt awkward at his neighbour’s solemn expression.

‘I know it is not easy,’ she shook her head. ‘You men are all the same, you bottle up your worries... if you need anything, just let me know. Perhaps you’re short of money?’

Rostom gaped at her. ‘What do you mean, Mzia?’

‘How could you help it... After all, no one can choose their luck... er ... but we’ll support you,’ she added kindly, and left.

Rostom was speechless. His head was aching worse than ever, filled with a roaring noise. It occurred to him that the postman must have left another letter at Mzia’s.

Lina’s diary

Twenty-sixth of March

There are two trees in our back yard. I’d like to write a poem about each of them. One tree looks like us, and the other is a pine tree. It used to be taller than us but we’ve caught up with it. It’s not exactly a Christmas tree like in the magazines and on TV, but it looks a bit like one. I like it a lot, anyway. At New Year we decorate it with toys and ribbons. When we were little we used to cut off a branch and put it up in the house. But then we began to feel sorry for the tree, so we stopped cutting branches off and decorated it in the yard instead. We don’t have many toys and anyway my sister is so clumsy she’s always breaking those we have. So it’s mainly decorated with ribbons tied in bows, it looks more like a tree of wishes than a Christmas tree. But still it’s lovely, and it makes the yard look beautiful. We look out of the window in the morning and it cheers us up.

Everything’s hard in wintertime. The snow makes the walls damp. Sometimes we can’t even turn on the heating because the gas is so expensive. Zaza finds it hard to come, but all the same we are always happy to see snow...