

COUNTING OUT

CONFLICT ZONE

Wednesday

Mother said: I've got no more milk, that's why he's crying. She's got no more milk, that's why he's crying, I said to Nintso. What will you do? Nintso said. The Gvelesianis again, there's no other solution. She was fiddling with the handle of the gate. Yesterday he had a convulsive fit, I said. From crying, then I again dipped my fingers in wine and put them in his mouth. Then he fell asleep again. I'm telling you. The Gvelesianis' pharmacy is the solution. That's what we must do. She'll kill me, I said. I felt sick. That child will die on you and then let your mother say that God is taking anagels to be with Him, Nintso said, her voice becoming shrill. Don't be blasphemous, I said. Why are both of you such morons, mother and daughter? I grabbed hold of Nintso's hand on the gate handle. Stop that, the sound is getting on my nerves. Hey. Nintso let it go. Don't you know what she's like? I said. She cursed me for an hour over the tea and macaroni stolen from Manana's shop. Hey, Nintso said, she again grasped the handle, how did she find out? Didn't you tell her the aid agency women gave them to you? Yes, I told her, only I forgot to remove the prices. Why are you such a moron? Why? Hey, let go of the handle. You let go. You let go first. Hey! We were quiet for a time, we looked at each other. Come in and let's go out together, Nintso said, she turned her eyes away. Zaura was sitting in the yard. He was looking in one direction. He was wearing an old suit, he had gathered all his rubbish on it, it hung on his chest. Look at him, is he off his head? Nintso said, he sits like that the whole day with those medals. Look, how she walks about, Zaura said. She's raising a slut. You're raising a slut, too. Her grandmother as well. Her. She's dying in her room. Grand-father, Nintso said to him, go inside, don't you see they're flying about. Just in case. Oh dear, Zaura said, he looked in the other direction. Nintso had dug up the earth for some flowers, I began to stamp it down. I'll change and come out, Nintso said. Her grandmother is dying, Zaura repeated. I didn't answer him. What kind of war is this, Zaura said, this isn't a war. These over here, those over there, still nothing in between. They'll open a corridor, I told him. What? Who said? Never mind a corridor. That's what they said, I told him, my classmate's father said so. Oh dear, Zaura said, they won't open one. Look here. They'll massacre us. They'll open one, I said, my classmate's father said so. They'll open one any day now. My classmate's father, my classmate's father, Zaura said, pulling a face. Leave that soil alone. They're flying like, he

looked up. Like what, I said. Like that. They'll massacre us. But in that case, I said to him, they'd have already massacred us by now. Just tell me one thing, girl, Zaura said, am I to be believed more or your classmate's crippled father? My classmate's father, I said to him. Oh dear, Zaura said, he fell silent. Hey, let's go out, Nintso said, she closed the door behind her. She was wearing a blue dress. She steals tobacco from me, she's a slut, Zaura said, he yelled at us. Nintso pretended not to hear, she turned a deaf ear to him, she was looking at her dress. See how snazzy it is, Teensy, I just ripped off those pockets, she grabbed the hem and started to flap it about. Then I recognised it. Thief, I said to her, thief! Just hold it, Nintso said, she raised her hand. Didn't I ask you not to take it, I said. Thief, how many times did I tell you not to take it, I said. Just don't you start, Nintso said, robbing the dead is not robbing, get that once and for all. How do you know she's dead? How do you know? I don't know, Nintso said, I only know her abandoned house, I know it well enough already you could take me in there blind-folded. And just lay off it, I've had enough. Fine, I said, fine. All right, Nintso said, a little while later, I really won't take anything else. I liked this one a lot, it's blue, I remember my mother wearing one like this. Good, I said to her, good. And I've got a surprise for you. We had come out to the main street, to an empty street. A surprise? I repeated inanely. Walk fast, Nintso could bear it no longer, we've got our errand and at the same time I'll show you a surprise. Good. On one condition, I said. Yes, OK, tell me that condition later. Why are you going this way? I asked her. They'll see us. That way is long. Nintso, they'll see us, I said to her. OK then, Nintso looked at me with her wide eyes, OK. We went round it from the other side. Look both ways, I told her. There's no one, Nintso said. I climbed over first, then Nintso. I was fast, she found it a little difficult. Carefully we opened the broken lock and sneaked in. We needed a little time for our eyes to get used to the dark. It was a dark house. We didn't even think of pulling the curtains open. Come over here, Nintso said, let me show you something cool! When have you been here? I asked her. I couldn't say, a couple of days ago, Nintso said, Kvernadze broke the lock. What a depraved boy he is, I said. Wow, Teensy, Nintso burst out laughing, don't use bad language. God will punish you for it. Go on, I told her, I jostled her. We went into the bedroom. Nintso opened a cupboard. Here we are, this is it, this is what I was telling you about. So what, I said to her indifferently. What do you mean so what, it's a CD player! With its discs. Can you imagine it? It appears they overlooked it, they didn't take it away! And look, it works as well, Nintso said, she was animated. How terrific, discs, lots of discs. Turn it down a little, I said to her. It looks like it was Datuna's. It'll have been Datuna's. Do you still remember Datuna? Nintso's eyes were lit up. Datuna! What a guy. Very cool. A serious guy. You won't remember him, when did you ever look at men? You're still a child, Nintso snorted with laughter. It's a serious den here,

isn't it? Yes, I said to her, just turn down the sound. Nintso stood up. Come Teensy, let's dance, come, do me a favour please. I don't want to, I said to her. Oh, come on now, Nintso didn't wait for me. She began to dance. This is fantastic! Nintso held her head high, she was swaying from side to side. And what was the surprise? I asked. Surprise? Wait a minute. Here's the surprise. Here's the marvel. Nintso took out a cigarettes packet from her bra. Where has that come from? I asked. Is this an interrogation, girl? Nintso stopped, she was no longer dancing. She turned off the player. Teensy, what's the matter with you? I can't recognise you any more. Why are you like that? Because of the child? Tell me, where did you get it, I was feeling sick. That blue-eyed guy gave them to me, Nintso said, she turned her eyes away. Nintso! I said, Nintso! Are you mad? Were you with them? Where I was, girl, is that I was going about my own business. I was bringing some plantain for Lamara, why are you acting crazily? He was the only one standing guard at the guard post. He called me and I went over. Nintso! I said. What. I said, you haven't a cigarette? I thought, I'll take one or two cigarettes from him, but he gave me the whole pack. As a present. As a present. Nintso. I said, don't you know that it's dangerous to be with them! If one of our people had seen it? I was feeling sick. But I don't give a damn, Nintso said, he's a cool guy. He's got blue eyes, what a body d'you know? I swear by my mother, he fancies me. Do you know with what eyes he was looking at me? Let me tell you something cool, I often see you and that little girl, he said about you. Yes, I said that's my little sister, she opened the pack. Moron! I said. Why was the lie necessary? Tell me! I'd have been a real moron if I'd said that we're both the same age, would he have believed me? Nintso looked down at her chest. You're horrible, I said to her. Then? Then what? He gave me a cigarette, I smiled at him and I came over, Nintso lit up. He smiled at me, too, he blew smoke in my direction. You're horrible, you make me sick, I said to her. If you've already managed to say so much, do you still have anything left to say, I said to her prickly. Yes indeed, Nint-so said. Good, when all this is over, let's thank your foreign language teacher, per-haps she'll give you a better mark. Nintso looked at me, she looked at me such that I stopped, I said no more. I lit up too. Listen to me, Nintso said after a little while, she stubbed out her cigarette in the matchbox, Kvernadze has some task for us. Kvernadze? I said, I repeated inanely. Yes, what's the matter, you're surprised, as if you didn't know him. It's some kind of task, serious, Nintso was very serious. All right, if it's Kvernadze, I said. Nintso cuffed me on the head. Good, she said, you've been in such a mood these days, you frighten me, I swear on my mother's soul. No, there's something peculiar about this tobacco, it's smooth, isn't it? It isn't like ours. It's good, isn't it, I said to her, it doesn't make me cough. It's good. What's the prob-lem in taking some more, Nintso laughed quietly to herself. Nintso! I said. Yes, all right, all right. I'm joking. What'll we do now?

Nintso said, she looked over the room. Come over here, some bundles of theirs are lying on the top of this cup-board and help me take them down. No, I said to her, we agreed. What did we agree? Nintso said, eh? You know very well what, I said to her, you won't take anything away from here. Wait a minute, Nintso said, let me first see what there is, then I'll act based on that. Nintso! I said. She placed a chair against the cupboard, she began to throw down the bundles one by one. Let me just see what there is, I'm not taking it, am I, only looking. Nintso! I said. Nintso, Nintso, Nintso! Nintso shouted, I'm tired, she stepped down from the chair, I'm tired. Either help me or not at all! I'm fed up with your goody-goodness! They've cleared off from here! Get it, once and for all, they've gone away! And do you know why? Because they weren't wretches like you and me, they had money! They paid and they left! Me? You? We must die here, we're not loaded like them. They'll still be alive, alive, and I – one of the dead – shouldn't take their rags. Eh? Eh? Nintso's veins stood out on her temples. Look at me now! I'll take it, I'll take everything, I'll take the whole house away! I'll take it all away! Nintso kicked at the chair. I'll take it away! She shrieked. Fine. I said quietly to her. Fine. As you wish, fine. I picked up the chair. Up you go and pass them to me. Nintso looked at me. Like this, she said. You could have helped me without an uproar, she stepped onto the chair, she handed me a bundle. They're clothes, they're old, I said to her, and some curtains as well. Very nice, too, she called down to me from above, I'll tear those curtains up for Lamara, but I'll wear those clothes! They're men's clothes, they're old. Then I'll tear them up for Lamara, too! Take a look, see! She showed me her hands, what they look like from washing Lamara's scraps, see! I'll spread them out again for her, I'll change them for her, and I'll throw them away! We sorted them out. They came to two bundles, we discarded the others right there. I'll take them out at night, still someone will see me, there'll be a row, Nintso said. Nintso, I said to her after a short while. But you swore to me? What? Nintso pretended to be surprised. You swore to me that you'd take nothing away from here, you swore to me. Oh, Nintso said, come off it, Teensy, I had my fingers crossed. Fingers crossed? I said. Of course, Nintso said, when I swear to you, I always have my fingers crossed. There are women's clothes, too, I said to her, do you want them? Of course, Nintso said. Look, I showed them to her. I want them, of course, tee-hee, Nintso giggled, just look at this, what a sight. What century, I wonder? Do we want these too? I said to her. I passed them to her one by one. Of course, I must put on a fashion show for Lamara and Zaura, Nintso broke out laughing, you must come, please. Fine, I said, I burst out laughing, too. Nintso threw down the clothes, she stepped down from the chair. Now let's go out, I'll take these things later. Come with me to gather plantain, I've run out. All right, I said, but first I'll drop in to my place. Then you go, I'll listen to music here for a little longer, Nintso picked up the player, be

here in an hour. Fine, I said, I shut the door behind me, I hadn't taken two steps when Nintso's voice could be heard. She was singing.