

JOURNEY TO AFRICA

Until now, I thought that only my mother had eyes of different colors. It turns out no, others have them as well. My father has honey-colored eyes, and me, too, but my mother has one blue, the other -- green. I don't remember anyone noticing them, and not being surprised -- "Ooh, Keti, what eyes you have!" My mother would always smile at this, as if she were even proud that she wasn't like others, but recently her eyes have taken on a single color; both of them are ash-grey. Maybe because she's started drinking.

When she's drunk, she gets in a bad mood: she'd sit me down and start talking at me, sometimes saying one thing, sometimes, who knows what. Then gradually, she'd get angry, start frothing at the mouth, as if I were guilty for the fact that we left our house in Tq'varcheli, and ran away, that it's been ten years since we've heard from my father, that she herself works as a salesperson in a cold kiosk, whose owner, an angry woman, is constantly accusing her of theft, but then, when they figure out nothing's been lost, doesn't even say she's sorry. As if I'm also guilty for the fact that she's become a drunk, that she's become accustomed to drinking vodka because of the cold, just as Tsupaka and I get high on glue, and now she's forced to drink every day, because "the devil gives her no peace." Once, she beat me. She beat me with the legs of a chair which we had standing up behind the door, just in case anything happened. She beat me so badly my forehead split open, and the little finger of my right hand broke. Thank God the neighbors ran in when I screamed, and helped me; otherwise she would have killed me. But I didn't leave home because I was afraid of this, I left for a completely different reason... I knew where she kept her money, and I took that money, and I also took her wedding ring, because I knew it was a gift from my father. At that time I was convinced I'd done the right thing, but now I think I committed something foolish -- it wasn't any of my business. But at the same time, my father hasn't shown up for such a long time, maybe he's no longer alive. At the thought of this, even now, a sweat of shame pours over me. I acted badly. No, I don't regret that I left because of fear, and even that I took the money -- thirty lari -- is no big deal, but I shouldn't have touched the ring...

I crawled out of the box, rubbed my eyes, and started fixing my breakfast: I took the aluminum bowl, a Coca-Cola bottle for water, then two eggs, and a match, all of which I put in my pea-coat pockets, and went up. There, I lit a fire between the two bricks, then poured the water into the bowl, put the eggs in, and set it on top.

I really like these morning activities. At that time, it's quiet in the city, you can hear the sound of the cars here and there, the sparrows are chirping in the plane trees, because they're cold. Sometimes, when I'm all hunched up from the cold, someone will walk by me on the street, stop when he sees me, and stare at me in amazement. I don't pay any attention, carry on with my business, add chips to the fire, and he'll leave very soon, hurry his steps, and disappear.

When we left there, my father was in a Sukhumi hospital; he'd had a heart attack and the doctors said he shouldn't be moved from his place. My grandmother was taking care of him. At that time I was six, but I still remember my parents' conversation very well: my father was insisting that my mother and I leave the city, but my mother didn't want to leave my father. In the end, my father got so angry, he became ill.

They were constantly shooting in the city, but my uncle Boria, our Tq'varcheli neighbor, sat us in his "06" and took us out of Sukhumi. Then, with others, we went on foot. It snowed on us in the pass. People were falling along the way, and dying, especially the old people and nursing infants. We

survived, and now we're here, but on our own, she by herself, and I -- by myself. I took the bowl off the fire, poured off the water, carried the boiled eggs into the basement and put them on a box covered in newspaper. Again, that ring is standing in front of my eyes, and suddenly I thought, what would happen, if I got up and went in search of my father. This thought made me so excited that my hands were shaking, and I couldn't peel the second egg -- I'm that kind of excitable person, I get so crazy about everything. While I was eating I was constantly thinking about the trip, and my heart was beating fast.

When I'd finished breakfast, I cleaned the "table," put my hand in the hiding place and took out the money and the gold ring wrapped in paper. I wrapped up the ring again in the paper, and put it in my pocket, and counted the money -- twenty-seven lari.

With this money, you could go anywhere you wanted!

I got up and looked all around. The basement was deep. From a window cut out at ground level, morning light came in and barely lit up the surroundings. No one has bothered me here. It's true, I've lived here only two weeks, but I've gotten so accustomed to it that I'm already feeling sad to leave it. I thought, at least I'll take my blanket, but how could I carry it? I might lose it, or someone might take it on the road -- it was an absolutely new blanket. Just now, I realized that I'm really going, and I calmed down, my hands were no longer shaking at all. I decided to go see Goshka. He knew everything, maybe even how I could get to Tq'varcheli. "Oh wow!" Goshka said to me, "You're not kidding! And what if the Abkhazians catch you, and kill you?"

"Why would they kill me?"

"Whadda ya' mean, you're Georgian, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So, they don't like Georgians."

"How will they know I'm Georgian?"

"How, well... do you speak Russian? No. Abkhazian? Not Abkhazian either. That means, you're Georgian."

He was right. I hadn't even thought about this. Ok, for example, I won't ask anybody anything, but what if they ask me something? It turns out, what do I know, what am I going to need? No, I need to think of something. While we were living there, I knew Russian and Georgian almost equally, but I've forgotten it in Tbilisi -- here everyone speaks Georgian.

"Hey, you can wave," Goshka said to me, "as if you're deaf and dumb. They'll ask you a question, and you with your hands, arms, get it?"

He's really a genius, that Goshka is, and he's not more than a year older than me.

"How can I get there?"

"Wow! It's easy. Do you have money?"

"Yep."

"By train. A ticket costs 8 lari. If you have a refugee ID -- it's four, and you'll get to Zugdidi, from there by bus to Enguri, then on foot across the bridge and then further by bus, till Ochamchire..."

"Does the bus go there?"

"Yes, it does."

"And from there?"

"There used to be an "electric commuter train," but now I don't know..."

I even remember it well when the "electric commuter train was there.

"By foot?"

"No, it's too far by foot... but if you go by foot, then along the railroad ties... follow the rails, got it?"

"Yeah."

"Now give me two lari."

"What for?!"

"Well, I taught you!"

I took out one lari, and gave it to him. I could've not given him anything. He's small and scrawny, he couldn't have taken it by force, but he deserves it.

He puts it in his pocket; he doesn't protest, but he doesn't say thanks, either. "OK, I'm off."

"So long, break a leg!" In the evening I bought a tin of sardines, two loaves of bread, and half a kilo of halva. I put everything in my old backpack, and went to the train station. Of course, I don't have a refugee's ID, so I paid eight lari for my ticket, and got in a third class wagon.

Everything happened very, very simply.

And so, the train set off, and the station building and the damp platform remained behind, then gradually it gathered speed.

From the wagon window appeared tall, ash-colored houses, some kind of old, abandoned factory or storage building, in whose courtyard stood a tractor, once yellow, but now eaten away by rust, and pipes, ties, rails thrown all around. Everything was moving slowly, as if sliding backwards without a sound. Now a road appeared, stretching out in the distance; kiosks were lined up along the pavement, and there, close by, a lonely, hungry dog...

The train gathered speed...

Why should I be afraid, what should I be afraid of -- the opposite, I was happy -- after all, I was doing what no one else could do, would dare to do, but I'd made up my mind, and was already on my way!

If only Tsupaka were alive, he would've come, too...

We would travel together to Ochamchire, and from there he would continue to Sukhumi, and I'd take off for Tq'varcheli. Even now, I remember the Tq'varcheli station platform, made of asphalt, and somehow wet... maybe it's raining... yes, it is raining -- puddles of water stand on the platform... Lida, an Abkhazian girl from our apartment complex, is announcing something or another on the station loudspeaker -- first in Abkhazian, then in Georgian, and finally in Russian. My mother is holding my hand in hers. My father is coming out of the station building, hiding a smoking cigarette in his fist so the rain doesn't get it wet, and with his other hand he waves to us from a distance. Apparently, we're going to Sukhumi, and my father was buying tickets for the "electric commuter train." From the platform you can see the smokestacks of the "Gresi" plant, on the left -- the mountains covered with forests, and red-tiled houses buried in the greenery. It's probably spring, or the end of winter, and because it's cold my father is wearing his blue jacket, and a light colored cap on his head. My parents work at "Gresi." My father is the mechanic of the Ortkali turbine, -- and my mother -- the operator of the waterworks. We live in a four-room apartment on the first floor of the "Gresi apartments." I'm not going to school yet, but I will soon. My mother and father work different shifts, and so they take turns being home. Sometimes it happens that both of them are home, and if it's Saturday or Sunday, then all three of us go to Sukhumi. In summer, we'd spend almost all day in Kelasuri, on the edge of the sea -- we'd bathe, lie in the sun. When we got hungry, we would buy delicious chebureki and eat them right there, on the beach.

In winter, we'd walk in the city. We go to the cinema and the shops, then we'd go to a restaurant by the shore, called "Dioscuri" and my father would order barbequed mtsvadi and a bottle of wine from. We'd sit there for a long time, you could hear music, my parents would talk peacefully, and I would look through the window at the turbulent sea, the seagulls, and the white seiner fishing boat, chugging and cutting through the waves.

Leaving the restaurant, we'd walk slowly towards the theatre, and there, inevitably, we'd go into a small, cozy cafe, where my mom and dad drank coffee, and I filled up on lemonade. In the evening, we'd return home. As a rule, I'd sleep on the way, and wake up right when we reach Tq'varcheli. From the wagon window, rubbing my eyes, I would look, and amazed, see our platform, our blue building, and the sign in Abkhazian, Georgian, and Russian. I already knew how to read, and would break into syllables: "Tq'va -rche-li!" and at the same time was amazed that we've arrived so quickly.

But now, my train is rushing headlong, the wheels rattling on the rails. Through the window appear the tall electric stakes and the telegraph wires stretching across the railroad. On the poles, the wires, stretched out, rise up high, rise up and up, and then dip down again. In the morning the commotion and noise of the travelers wakes me up - the train has pulled into the Zugdidi station. When I realize this, my heart begins to beat faster. The train hasn't stopped yet, but the people are already heading towards the exit, a long line has formed by the wagon door, and I, too, stand in that line...