

The Literature Express

1. Tbilisi

The Russians bombed us in August. Elene broke up with me in September. In October I went to Lisbon.

I knew I'd be taking the Literature Express as early as spring, but I could have never imagined the Russians would shell us in August. Neither had I taken Elene's threats seriously. I never thought she'd be so adamant. Everything seemed to be happening at the same time. First I was told I was to travel along with 100 writers across Europe, then it looked as if the Russian bombs were about to kill me and finally it transpired I wasn't such a wingless angel as Elene had believed earlier.

"I'm sorry for the time I wasted on you," was the last I heard from her. Then she switched off her phone. I sent her two miserable messages and gave up. I didn't beg or plead with her. The Russian bombs drained me of all energy. But prior to that someone called Koka phoned me, mentioned the Literature Express and summoned me to the Ministry of Culture.

It turned out the Literature Express was actually a train. One hundred writers from various countries were to board it and cross half of Europe over a month.

For some reason the invitation had arrived at the Ministry of Culture. Koka frankly admitted he had thought of me only when the poet Khavtasi (one of our senile ones) refused to go. There were two invitations. Koka told me initially they'd planned to send two poets (apparently, the Minister had said poets would add a certain charm to the entire trip), but then they decided to make place for me, a prose writer. In the end, it was me and a poet chosen for the trip.

It still baffles me how Koka and his superiors had come up with me and not someone else. Whose idea was it to send me to Lisbon? Others have dozens of books published while I've got one single collection of short stories... Who considered me a bona fide writer in such a kleptocratic organisation as the Minis⁴² try? I suspect Koka (who I guess was something like the Deputy Minister) – an effeminate, mildly aggressive provincial with sideburns. Apparently, when I was awarded with the prize (I've received a local literature prize for my short stories), he was there at the ceremony, bought my book the next day and enjoyed it tremendously. That's what he told me.

The very same day I wrote to Heintz, the organiser of the literature trip. In reply, I received a semi-formal letter with the enclosed trip itinerary. His missive started with Dear Mr. or Mrs. Zaza. He seemed unsure who he was writing to – a male or a female. Completely confused by my first name. I wrote back saying I was a male and that Zaza is a solely male name in Georgia. Needless to say, I added some smileys (you know, these buttock-like faces).

The train journey sent me into a state of a light shock. The idea of the Literature Express packed with poets and writers travelling across seven European countries beat me even as I tried to envision the trek.

I remember sharing my fears with Elene who, in her typically motherly-pedagogical manner, chided me:

"Don't say a word! God knows when you might get another chance like this. You must be completely insane to miss it!"

I also remember Elene and me studying the route on the map. We'd taken my grandpa's old globe to bed with us, placing it between us as if it were a baby. We looked closely at the cities the Express was to go through.

The train was due to leave Lisbon and pass through Madrid, Paris, Brussels, Frankfurt, Malbork (which we failed to find on the globe), Kaliningrad, Moscow (which I immediately bade farewell as no Georgian was allowed into Russia: we were refused visas), Warsaw and, finally, Berlin. In short,

we were to cross half of Europe. "In future, we plan to organise an European-Asian trip", Heintz said later. "This time the money only covers half of Europe."

Incidentally, at the time the Russian plane dropped a bomb on Mount Makhata we were in bed, too.

It was five in the morning. Elene and I were woken by a deafening noise of a blast. I thought the TV transmitting tower had been blown up. It was right there, above our house and I imagined the metal monster falling on our tiny house in an infernal blaze...

Elene had opened the window and was looking out.

"No," she said. "It's still there."

"Where did it drop then?" I asked happily.

She stepped onto the balcony, shaded her eyes with her hand for some reason and looked up in fear.

"I'm not sure. I can't see," she replied.

We got dressed, threw our passports into her handbag and sat down to watch TV.

"If we're shelled again, we'll hide under the stairs," Elene decided. I put my head on her shoulder.

"It's crucial for the mobiles to work," I said.

I recall trying hard to stay calm: I yawned noisily and joked, telling her I'd never imagined we were able to dress so quickly. Basically, I was overexcited with dread.

"And all the while you were worried about getting tired on that train. Aren't you bonkers?" Elene told me.

True. I hadn't counted on being killed by the Russians in August...

Later that morning we found out the bomb had fallen across the river, quite far from us, in the vicinity of the Tbilisi Sea.

That night I believed I had no one in the world as precious as Elene. That's how we'd fallen asleep in front of the working TV. She had her little handbag in her lap, I had my head on her shoulder.

We split up in a month.

As a rule, I don't drink often, but if I do, it's something alarming. I don't get sour or vicious. I just laugh a lot and don't want the day to finish. In short, absurd as it sounds, I'd been talking in my sleep.

In the morning Elene was waiting for me in the kitchen. Sitting at the window, she eyed me with a mixture of disgust and irony.

"Who's Maka?" she asked.

I thought she'd read a message or something.

I'd got acquainted with Maka on Skype during the August war. She was scared, stiff but foolishly-hysterically coquettish at the same time. I'd never come across anything like this in my life. She used to write texts like: "When the Russians march into Tbilisi, I'm going to commit suicide... But don't tell me you don't care for blue-eyed girls. By the way, what colour are your eyes?" She sounded somewhat simple and unrefined, but was a real looker.

In a nutshell, I had a kind of therapeutic and sad sex with poor Maka. True.

She was on the verge of tears all the time, while I felt pangs of consciousness for treating Elene in such a ghastly way.

All in all, Maka and I met three or four times. Hard as I tried, I couldn't make her come even once. That's the reason she might have felt like crying. I'm not sure.

"We need to get to know each other better, much better," she used to say over

and over again.

How much better was I supposed to know her?

If I hadn't talked in my sleep, no one would have found out what I'd done. As far as I know, it hadn't happened before. Apparently, I was so drunk I readily answered all of Elene's questions – what's easier than getting me to talk? I'm not a medium. Unfortunately, I failed to realise where I was and who was conducting the fatal interrogation.

In the beginning, I found it hard to believe no one had informed her. She might have seen an incriminating message in my phone. But then I stopped caring. Come what may, I thought. Deep down I knew perfectly well the crisis in our relationship wasn't caused by that night's chatter.

"I'm sick and tired of having to drag you," she said a year earlier, at the seaside. She must have considered splitting up at that moment. What she had thought appealing in me (my oddities typical of a writer, my lifestyle, my lovable infantilism) by then had turned into a tedious, depressing reality. Some produce of piles of books and still don't earn enough, while I had published a single book two years earlier with only 400 copies sold. So how on earth would I make any money? "At least a thousand copies need to be sold in order to get a bestseller rating," my publisher had told me. My salary was just enough to buy me cigarettes (while I still smoked). I did receive a literature prize, but still live off my parents. I go to bed at four in the morning and wake up at midday, but only as a courtesy as I can easily sleep till later. Looking through Elene's eyes, I used to find it awkward, now it's this novel I find embarrassing. I go to work twice a week, write a couple of ads, mess around a little and come back. And now, on top of everything, it's someone called Maka I'm after. In short, I seem to be a complex problem for Elene. Or rather, was. Not anymore.

"I always feel down with you," she admitted that morning, "Because you've always got some problem or another which I'm obliged to solve for you. You're not an angel, strictly speaking, so it's not worth sacrificing my life." The house we rented at the time (chosen by me but paid for by Elene) had withstood the August shelling together with us. But I vacated it for two weeks after she had left me.

"You can stay if you wish," the owner told me. "You might find someone to pay for it."

I didn't want to stay as everything there reminded me of Elene, so I moved in back with my parents, into my teenager cell.

I sent her only two messages. I didn't persist.

And in October I flew to Lisbon together with the poet Zviad Meipariani.

He had brought along a literary newspaper in which some poet-critic vehemently disparaged us. The author criticised Koka (and the likes of him) of the Ministry of Culture for selecting us, rumbling on: What sort of writers are they anyway? Why have they and not some other, worthier writers been chosen for the seminar? He claimed I was helped by my mum (she is the Vice-President of our national chess federation), but was sparingly critical of Zviad: He is not bad, but there are others, million times better poets. In short, he assaulted me more passionately, calling me "the author of a heartless brochure".

"We don't give a damn, do we?" Zviad wisely suggested. "We're on the plane already, while this dick's in his lousy office."

I wasn't perturbed in the least anyway and didn't need his encouragement. I immediately guessed he was uneasy about the whole thing and tried to hearten himself with the words.

Later I found out he wasn't disturbed by the article at all. The truth was he was scared stiff of flying and, like any Georgian in a similar situation, drank himself unconscious. I was sure he'd puke all over me upon landing, but he didn't. The flight was uneventful in this respect.

If I'm not mistaken, I had decided to write a diary novel then and there. I wanted to keep a record of my impressions. Of what happened and of what was about to happen. I just had to find a place for the war and Elene. Zviad already was a designated character.

What I didn't know at the time was that another Helena in my life would become the main character of my novel.

This is the diary of the month-long pursuit of Helena.

2. The Plane

Helena was a still far away. While I was suspended somewhere in mid-air, she might have been driving to Athens airport with her husband.

There was water beneath me – the Black Sea.

As a rule, the outbound flights from our home airport leave early in the morning. I believe it's explained by the fact that the night sky is cheaper compared to that of the daytime, which is sufficient ground for all the vampire airlines flying to our country to passionately hate the daylight. Our flight was no exception – we were to take to the sky at four in the morning.

Zviad had insisted on getting to the airport three hours ahead of the scheduled flight. Not two, but full three hours. I've firmly learnt from my childhood that one absolutely has to be there two hours earlier and I've got nothing against this longstanding tradition. I'm all in for these two hours, but three was somewhat unexpected and, to tell the truth, a little alarming. It was when I first suspected that the man was an epitome of the classic Georgian male fretfulness, which meant spending the entire month fighting his pet worries. Could these three hours be an indication of something much more sinister to come?

I have to admit, I also tend to be gripped with a kind of pre-departure hysteria. I sometimes believe I might lose my way in a huge airport or worse, I can get mistaken for a wanted terrorist, unable to convince the airport authorities with my broken English that I'm someone else. I detest those seconds when my passport is checked by foreign officers (I don't fear my countrymen). I abhor the minute I have to stand behind the glass, awaiting the paradise pass from a green-uniformed alien.

At times like these, I try to look as gentle as possible, my expression saying: Such a pity you don't know me. I mean no harm. I'm as law-abiding as you are.

I guess the Europeans don't suspect such complexes exist. One has to come from the former Soviet Union or be a survivor of the 80s in order to understand these fears. The fear of making a mistake. The fear of misdemeanor. The fear of pissing in the Vienna airport toilet designed for the handicapped and being obliged to pay the fine out of the miserable amount you managed to save for your trip abroad. Why have you urinated in the toilet for the handicapped, citizen?

To cut it short, I also feel a little uncomfortable before departure, but the poet Z. Meipariani certainly overdid it in this respect: he called me five or six times, compared the info on his ticket with that on mine, repeating over and over again that his brother-in-law was going to drive us to the airport. Finally, upon hearing I was planning to take a nap before the flight, he made a heart-rending confession: he hadn't slept for days and lost any wish to go on living. He was 16 when he'd flown the last time – his uncles had taken him to Moscow to bring back his deceased great-aunt. No wonder his memories connected with air travel were far from cheerful. It was then, in the plane toilet, when he wrote his first serious poem. "It was a strange feeling," he told me. "We were up there, in the air, with my great-aunt in a bag."

Zviad started drinking in the airport, couldn't find his passport in his pocket when needed, kind of crashed into an energetic, hypocritically smiling doll-like air hostess and then, already in his seat, rammed his knees into the seat in front. "That's it, he's going to piss everyone off," I thought with a sinking heart, regretting I had accepted the invitation to join the Literature Express. I couldn't help thinking Zviad was only a tiny link in a chain of misfortunes.

Commonly, I'm a bit depressed in the morning, so no wonder 4 a.m. isn't my brightest hour. The war two months ago, Elene dumping me, sleep-deprived passengers, inflatable life jackets and an utterly unrealistic survival procedure demonstrated by the air attendant, along with puking packets and drunken Zviad, depressed me to the extent that I seemed to be seized by the characteristic anxiety of all Georgian males – the fear of novelty.

"I'm suffocating," I remember thinking as I positioned my forehead in the direct line of the weak fresh air current coming from above.

I wasn't sure why I was going, why I had to be torn away from my comfortable routine for a whole month, why I was there so early in the morning among all these strangers – a bunch of aggressive psychopaths.

Yes, I felt bad, pretty bad, but at least one thing was crystal clear – sleep was the only escape route from drunken Zviad and the hypocritically smiling air hostess. Falling asleep was the way out. For self-preservation.

"Zaza, are we airbourne?" Zviad turned his puffy red face towards me.

"Not yet," I replied.

My guess was he couldn't bear to look through the window.

"We humans are so miserable," he muttered with the desperation of King Lear and sunk into his personal phobias: with his eyes closed, he began producing funny spurting noises with his lips and nodding his head in the manner of a coquettish jazz lover. A foreigner with dyed hair sitting next to him (unquestionably a foreigner because of his unnaturally popped-out eyes and a tense smile) gave me a horrified look. He had no explanation for Zviad's behaviour.

In short, we were all terrified: I of the unknown future, the foreigner of Zviad and Zviad of flying. My poor colleague was unaware he'd already become someone else's horror. Was it completely inconceivable that this suspicious muttering was an indication of a far more sinister danger looming ahead of us? Could it be nothing more than a prayer? But it's no secret how petrified the well-organised Anglo-Saxons are of praying during flights. So what if the plane just left a Christian land – an audible prayer is invariably dangerous!

And what images might have flashed through the foreigner's mind: a darkhaired man (poet Z. Meipariani) jumping from his seat as soon as the plane straightened, stabbing the air hostess (exactly at the moment when she was offering apple juice with an annoying hissing S sound: "With icce?") and then the plane heading towards an Arab country. Or, possibly, to the Christian Copts in Africa.

He was glancing at Zviad with deep concern. I thought he was about to send his wife a farewell phone message, as prescribed: We're hijacked. Love you. Wish I'd told you more often.

"Zviad," I nudged the nodding poet.

"What?" He opened his eyes.

"Are you praying?"

"No. Why?"

"What are you doing then?"

“Nothing. I badly need to pee.”

“That man thinks you’re a terrorist. Please, stop it.”

“Who?” He sat up.

“Him,” I indicated the passenger next to him. The man smiled back at us with his glass eyes.

“What’s it I’m doing?” Zviad smiled back at him.

“Nodding and spurting.”

“I’m writing a poem,” he laughed. “No guts for terrorism!”

He unbuckled his seat belt and rose.

“You can’t leave your seat yet,” I grabbed his arm.

The foreigner was visibly scared of even looking at him. He stared at the seat in front and turned into a stone passenger.

“I’m going to burst if I don’t take a pee”, Zviad said and nearly trampled the poor man, practically pressing his bum into his face and stepping over his knees. Then he wobbled towards the toilet.

I’m rather selfish. Elene ran from my egotism and not from me. But that’s another story. “I don’t give a damn what he does,” I thought looking up at the panel with the crossed cigarette and mobile phone and red-lit seat belt signs.

The thick-legged air hostess reached Zviad before he got into the toilet. In the meantime, I put fingernail-sized rubber plugs into my ears, telling myself I was alone. There was no Zviad.

It didn’t take much to put him back into his seat. A couple of strict words uttered by the thick-legged hostess did the job. I’m pretty sure he didn’t protest only because he wasn’t on a flight of a Georgian company, otherwise he’d certainly haggle with each and every passenger and possibly smoke in the toilet as well.

“I shouldn’t have drunk,” he said as he took his seat.

I pretended I was asleep. I wasn’t in the least interested what he had to do and what he shouldn’t have done. Content with the results of the policy of ignoring him, I fell asleep.

However, I was soon woken up by a jolt. “Just turbulence,” I reassured myself and looked at the miserable chap. He was asleep with his mouth agape. He might have pissed himself for all I knew. The foreigner with the dyed hair seemed to be still immobilised by a wicked witch. It smelled of food on the plane. I rested my head on the porthole and peered down. We were flying over the Black Sea.

Before I dozed off again, I remember thinking I needed to write something about the sea. Can you recall many Georgian writers depicting the sea, producing marine stories, novels, plays or poems?

There was a two-hour literary void underneath.

As it often happens at moments of complete idleness, I began thinking of a new plot. I wanted to come up with a marine plot, but to my great annoyance, I ended up with one single image out of all the possible ones related to the Black Sea. I might have nodded off as I pictured a middle-aged seaside village woman going into the water in her light dress. I’ve often witnessed such a weird moralistic tradition: the village women tend to bathe in their light summer frocks, always stay close to the beach, hold their naked grandsons tight, happily splashing and loudly giggling in the shallow water...

I clearly remember getting angry with myself for such an idiosyncrasy: the sea is so vast while I got stuck with these women.