

The Golden Town

“Ma’am, there’s nothing I can do to help you. According to the state, this child does not legally exist. You have to listen to what I’m saying. Do you understand? He does not show up anywhere in our records. Therefore, you count as the mother of three— your family is not big enough to qualify for aid. The only possibility I see is to somehow set the child up with some relatives and get him a birth certificate.”

The social worker had such a sad face and tired voice as she explained all this to my mother that you would have felt sorry for her. She was probably around twenty, with curly red hair. She didn’t look like the others. When Mom passed her some beautifully cut and peeled apple slices, she readily helped herself. The other social workers would never accept anything Mom offered.

“You are already struggling enough,” they would say. At these times I would feel very embarrassed. I liked this girl, who took the apple without even thinking. My mother was happy too.

“Please have more,” she insisted. “This blessed gold mine will be built and save us. We won’t always have these dark days,” she said, sadly.

“God willing, ma’am.” replied the redhead.

“In this blessed earth, there is gold everywhere, my child. If used with kindness and generosity, there is enough for everyone.”

“God willing, ma’am.” replied the redhead.

The social worker collected her papers, threw them into a black bag, said goodbye, and went out. The door had not even shut before Gigo let out a terrifying wail.

“Moom, why do I not exist?? Did I die?”

In one arm, Mother held Niaco, who was sobbing quietly. With her free hand, she was preparing food.

“Gigo, at least you stop crying. Of course you did not die. You exist.”

“You see me, right?” Gigo asked doubtfully.

“That’s enough. You exist and that’s it!” Mom answered, getting angry.

Gigo sat at a low stool by the stove. Time to time he would steal furtive glances towards Mother. It was obvious he still had a thousand questions to ask. Then he was talking to himself, but you could not distinguish what he was saying. Suddenly he turned to me and asked:

“Do you love me?”

“Don’t be silly,” I answered uneasily. No one had asked me that before.

“Tell me.” He wouldn’t leave me alone.

“Stop it, I said.”

“Tell me you love me. If you love me, then I exist.”

I wanted to tell Gigo I loved him. But until now I had never told anyone that, and I was awfully embarrassed. Even Mom never said she loved us. A loong, loong time ago, when we had a house, Dad would say that to Mom. Not anymore though.

It probably wasn't even 8 o' clock when I woke up. We were supposed to go play soccer. Father, Mother, Niaco, Gigo, Grandma, and I sleep in one room. We also have one more brother- Tengo. He is in Turkey, gone for work. Before he left, he used to sleep with us too. So did Grandpa, who died a few years ago. Without them, the house seems empty to me.

Mom is a light sleeper. If Niaco wakes up, then we are totally doomed. They will not let us go to the stadium. Gigo sleeps next to Father. Scared of waking him, I could not approach. I could only watch and wait until Gigo opened his eyes himself.

I didn't even have to wait 5 minutes. When his eyes shot open, there was such a fear in them, that I couldn't bring myself to let him lie there waiting, and gave an almost inaudible whistle to get his attention. He looked at me, and his eyes lit up so brightly that I could not help but smile.

We grabbed our clothes and ran into the yard. We dressed outside so the noise would not wake anyone. It was October, but the mornings were already very cold.

"I thought you left without me," said Gigo. "Just so you know, I would have killed you," he added as he scrunched his forehead and looked up at me menacingly.

"What are you gonna do without sneakers, anyway?"

"What do I need them for? Am I going to run? I just stand in the goal. I can jump just fine in flip-flops," he replied, and immediately, he proved he could. He jumped, stretching his body the air, and slammed back to the rain-soaked ground with all his might. He stood up and in a convincing voice said, "We definitely have to win this time. Last time, we lost because of their stupid arguing."

"We have to win," I agreed. "Just don't start whining like last time. 'Oh they're kicking too hard!' And then they brag that they can't go all out because we put small children in the goal."

"No, no, I won't say that anymore. You already taught me to spit on my hands, right? It's disgusting, but I'll spit on my hands. It really helps. My hands don't hurt anymore and I catch the ball better too."

"Ok, enough already with the spitting. Why do you find it so repulsive? We're not spitting on you... it's your spit. Make sure you do it. "

"Ok, ok, I promise."

We got to the stadium. All the neighborhood kids were there already. Last night's rain had left puddles here and there. Of course, the worst conditions were right in front of the goal.

"Looks like you're gonna be splashing around a lot." I looked over at Gigo sympathetically.

"It's nothing, I'll wash off in the well."

Meanwhile, Zaza and Rezi joined us.

“We’re putting the baby in the goal again?” asked Rezo, disapprovingly.

“He’s eight already; what do you want?”

“In eight months I will be nine,” Gigo added.

“They’ll rip us apart,” said Zaza, waving his arm dismissively.

“Yeah, if you guys shit your pants before we start, of course they will.”

“Who? Us?” they both attacked me at once.

“Alright, ok.. Stop it already. We really gotta win today.”

“Still don’t feel like spitting on your hands?” they turned back to Gigo.

Gigo didn’t even let them finish the question before he spit, with all his might, first on one hand, and then the other. He showed us his palms and grinned ear to ear.

At nine, our opponents arrived. Rezi spotted one of them from far away and began his whining again.

“Oh shit, they brought Nodara. He’ll destroy us again.”

“Hey guys,” the newcomers called out to us.

“Back for more fun, ya? Are we gonna shut you out again, or will you guys make at least one this time?”

“I brought my newspaper,” called their goalkeeper, laughing at his own joke.

“You should have brought your reclining chair too,” his teammates added, bursting into laughter.

“Ok, enough. Let’s start.”

“Let’s start!”

“Till four.”

“Ok, till four.”

They brought the ball into play. The one called Nodara was two heads taller than us. He got the ball and came at us with such speed that Zaza only followed him with his eyes. Then he slammed Rezi with his shoulder and also left him behind. Using all my strength, I sprinted and slid between his feet, sending us both to the muddy ground with a splat. The droplets splashed Gigo.

“I’ll be a son of a whore! It’s a penalty,” Nodara jumped to his feet. The others joined him at his side.

If someone cursed like that, then it absolutely had to be a penalty. If you did not agree to it, then this meant that the curse really did count against their mother, and the one who cursed has the right to hit you right then.

“It’s a penalty,” I agreed.

“It’s a penalty,” repeated Nodara, satisfied.

Then, from the goal, he took seven measured steps, leveled the dirt, and put the ball down. Gigo stood slightly hunched over, with his hands resting on his knees.

“Watch the ball, kid, don’t let your eyes off of it,” I called out to him.

Nodara took three steps back, rushed forward and smashed the ball from below. Gigo threw himself into the air, but the ball went into a very high corner. They scored.

Gigo stood up and made to leave the field.

“If you want, put someone else on the goal,” he called out, almost in tears.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I answered, and looked over at Zaza and Rezi so they wouldn’t say anything.

Then they scored again and we were losing 3-0. The third goal was entirely Gigo’s fault. The ball was already caught in his hands, and he dropped it, adding another one for them. Rezi got mad, but he calmed his nerves and said to Gigo:

“Why don’t you take a rest? Nika will take over for a while.”

Before Gigo left the goal, he looked over at me, but I avoided his eyes. With his head down, he left the field and sat right off to the side.

An hour passed, at least. Already we were all covered in mud. We could barely stand from tiredness. My sneakers had almost ripped all the way through; I could not run anymore.

A corner kick was awarded at their goal. Zaza passed the ball. I wanted to stop it with my chest, but I failed and helped stop it with my hand. Then I kicked it. The goalie didn’t even move.

“Yes, Gooal!” Gigo rushed onto the stadium and hugged me.

“Goal!” yelled our team.

“He stopped it with his hand, it doesn’t count,” said Nodara calmly.

“I didn’t stop it with my hand,” I argued.

“Go ahead then, curse.”

“I won’t curse.”

“So you’re lying.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Then why aren’t you cursing?”

“I never curse.”

“Then swear.”

“Swear on what?”

“Your brother.”

I became quiet, and suddenly Gigo pulled me by the hand and whispered:

“Swear to him, I don’t exist anyway, right?”

“I won’t swear,” I said firmly.

“Ok then, it doesn’t count and we continue.”

We continued and they scored again. We lost again without making a single point.

We went to the well. We tried, as hard as we could, to remove the dirt from our clothes, but it wasn’t working. Gigo’s feet were especially filthy. He had basically been barefoot in those puddles, and he had mud stuck in his toenails. We did what we could to clean ourselves. As soon as we got home, Father started roaring, and Mother- crying.

Father called us filthy and beat us both. Mother grieved, I don't even have enough laundry detergent for Niaco's clothes, what am I supposed to do with all this?

There was mud stuck in our hair too, and we didn't have any shampoo.

Freshly beaten, Gigo made to lie down in his bed, but for this Father hit him again. "How are you planning to lie down on your sheets with so much mud?" He said.

Crying, he crawled under the bed. In whispers, he kept repeating: "I don't exist, I don't exist, I don't exist..."

We are from Kazreti. We used to have a house. I don't remember it well, but it was big and bright. Then Father got into debt and they took it from us. Now we live in a hand-nailed hut. The same place where before there was a sheep pen.

We don't have a legal address, so we can't get any social aid. They came at least ten times from the social service but they could never help us.

We don't have anywhere to go, although even if we did, Father does not plan to set foot anywhere else. He says that here, in this spot, they will build a gold mine. This is not just his fantasy. The neighbors watch us with envy. They also know the deal with the mine. Our local official promised the construction of the mine would begin very soon in the future. The church pastor also said the same thing.

In our town, gold can be found even now, although not much. They think that the gold ore is only in the mountains, however, all the oldest locals know that you can mine gold practically everywhere in the town. Especially the place where our hut is. There are some neighbors who find the whole thing to be a big joke. They say that the gold ore does not exist. Sometimes they argue until the night. The younger ones are skeptical. The ones who do believe in the gold deposits watch the nonbelievers as enemies. Because of this gold issue the town is divided into two sides.

I think that all this talk about the gold mine is silly. Earlier, when I loved my Father, I believed it, but now I hate him and his absurd ideas. When I think about my father, I remember what Grandma used to say. Grandma loved birds more than anything. She would spend entire days sitting in the yard and observing them. She used to tell us a lot about them. Grandma told us that the majority of birds could not recognize their own chicks. Some instinct makes them bring worms back to their nest, and it doesn't matter if they find their own chicks there or not. She told us that she had saved countless orphaned sparrows like this, placing the chicks in other birds' nests where they would be fed.

Father looks like a bird too. If some other kids were to find themselves in our house, he probably wouldn't notice anything. He'll come in like always, set food on the table, and throw himself headfirst onto his bed.

He doesn't even look at us; he doesn't love us anymore. It's been years since we talked about anything. Except when he's fighting with us, shouting terrible words.

Sometimes, he's beaten us so badly, with his callused hands, that our faces would burn like fire all day. These times, I could only hear his teeth grinding together. He pushes them together so hard that one would think they would all fall out. He already doesn't even have his

back teeth anymore. His gums are infected, and the smell of blood and rotten eggs comes from his mouth. My stomach turns every time I have to sit next to him when its time to eat. At the table there are only four chairs. Father and Mother never sit next to each other. It means that either Gigo or I have to sit next to Father. I always try to beat him and take the seat next to Mom.

Mother says that Gigo was born at home. She could not go to the hospital so that's why Gigo does not have a birth certificate. Because of this, he can't go to school, and besides that, when he was six, we did not have money to buy him clothes, a backpack, or books. Furthermore, he was physically small, so Father said it was better to start him at school when he was seven. He himself started school when he was seven. Mom agreed.

One year passed, but nothing changed so we put it off again. After that, Mother was ashamed of the teachers. They would criticize and blame her, why did you not bring him for so long?

I go to school, but very rarely. I help my father collect scrap metal. Getting food is a struggle, but somehow we manage. The worst thing is that there is always fighting in our house. Father's nerves are in an awful state. He doesn't like even one small thing and he becomes unrecognizable. He smashes everything; he hits Mother, and us. Before, Mother used to be more calm, but now she is always yelling. I hate fighting, but at times I have beaten Gigo too. Afterwards, I feel sorry for him, but right then, when he's making me angry, I don't think about it.

If they are not fighting and yelling, then being in our house is like lying in a coffin. No one makes a sound. We probably don't have anything to talk about. Sometimes I think we do not even know each other.

One time, my classmates were playing that game where you look at each other in the eyes without laughing. That's when I realized that I had never looked directly into someone's eyes in my entire life. Mother and Father don't look each other in the eyes either.

Grandma became completely mute after Grandpa died. The doctors said it was because she was sick, but I don't think there is anything wrong with her; she just doesn't want to talk anymore. That was the first time I saw someone who wanted to sleep all day. She was almost dead. Sometimes, rarely, she would eat, but even then she wasn't really here. She used to be completely different. She was always reading us something or telling us stories. Most of all, Gigo and I loved the Greek myths. Grandma would read to us from an old, worn book which had all the gods and goddesses, alphabetically. We liked the myth of the Argonauts the most, of course.

Grandma did not just know stories; she used to make medicines before. She also used say blessings. She said some of them so beautifully, that nothing was better than listening to her. It was a good time, but it's been a long time since she forgot all that.

Now she only cuts our hair. Before, she would always do it once every two weeks. Now, she misses it sometimes. She seats us on chairs in the yard, puts a white sheet on our shoulders and beautifully cuts our hair. Then she collects every strand of hair and buries it in the ground.

This is an old local custom. Grandma believes that, after many years, the hair will turn into gold. Especially golden hair. Gigo has exactly that. Me — a little darker.

We miss the old, alive, Grandma very much, but we have accepted that we will never see her again either. She basically died along with Grandpa.

Everyone always respected Grandpa. Even after he had a stroke and wasn't all there, the way the younger people would still meet him in the street, you would think he was a religious figure. I have heard old stories about him many times.

Everybody praised his honorable behavior. He saved several people from death completely. Grandpa was a kind man, but if you didn't know him well, he could seem very unsociable. Sometimes he would tell us something so rudely that you would think — this man definitely hates us and it's better to avoid him. The next minute he would be kind and caring, but you still couldn't get him to say anything nice. By the way, Grandpa believed in the existence of the gold, and, when he was alive, no one dared to argue about this.

On the other hand, Grandma never let Grandpa get away with anything. The two of them were always bickering. Grandma looked at our Father like a small boy, and all our problems, hunger, lack of money, she only blamed on Grandpa. Eventually, Grandma got sick too—her nerves failed her. After every fight, she would run from the house. She would say, I don't want to live in this terrible place and watch these children die. She would pack a few of her dresses, give me, Gigo, and Tengo each a kiss, and run towards the railway station. We would yell. Grandpa would chase after her... Then they would talk in the street for hours. Eventually, they would return. We were very happy, and would hug them both. This sort of thing would happen sometimes several times a week. Grandma would run and Grandpa would chase her. Because of this Grandpa lost his long-standing authority with the neighbors. At first quietly, and then loudly, they would joke about this. Everything got worse once Grandpa became bed-ridden. Grandma still ran away, and these times, Gigo and Tengo and I would bring her back.

One time, when Grandma ran away again, Grandpa couldn't get out of bed, and started to yell. He was calling us. He was already crying when we got there.

"Hurry, just don't let her beat you to the railroad station. If she gets there, everything is over," he said.

We chased after Grandma. I pulled her elbow, hanging on it. Gigo wrapped himself around her legs. We begged, we pleaded.

Grandpa came from the house, dragging a chair, and leaning on it time to time. With great effort, he finally reached us and squeezed Grandma's hand tight. It was if he wanted to hug her but was a little embarrassed by us. Grandma's hair was a mess, and Grandpa was carefully, one strand at a time, fixing it and putting each one in its place.

"Marusa, where are you going to go like such a crazy woman? Come home, dress warmly, brush your hair..."

Grandma was crying and endlessly repeating:

"You never speak to me normally, you never speak to me normally..."

In the evening, I asked Grandpa:

“What would happen if Grandma reached the station? She doesn’t even have money to go anywhere, and the commuter train only leaves in the morning.”

Grandpa was silent for a while. Then he answered:

“If she made it to the station, she would realize she has no where to go and she will never run away again...”

“But isn’t that what we want, Grandpa?”

“We want Marusa to want to be with us.”

That morning, when I woke up, Gigo was sitting on my bed.

“Good morning,” he said and grinned.

I could swear that this was the first time anyone had said that to me. Before that, I had only heard it in movies. In our house, no one says such things. I don’t think even our neighbors do either...

Of course, I didn’t answer Gigo. I just felt a little awkward.

“You say it too, ok?” begged Gigo.

“What’s your problem?”

“Just say it, ok?” He wouldn’t leave me alone.

“Good morning,” I said, feeling as though I had just said a silly poem on stage in front of the whole school.

On the other hand, Gigo was so excited, he could barely contain his happiness.

Then, sympathetically, he asked me:

“You’re embarrassed right? To say good words? You’re a fool. Though you do say nice things when we play soccer... It’s ok, you’ll learn... When I say nice things, I believe I exist.”

In the evening we were sitting in the yard. Gigo was sitting alone and again whispering to himself. You couldn’t tell what he was saying, but it was clear that he was having a serious debate with himself.

I went over and asked him:

“Kid, what’s with all this talk about not existing, not existing?”

“That woman said it, didn’t she?”

“She meant something else.”

“She didn’t mean anything else, she said about me, ‘he doesn’t exist.’ Why didn’t she say that about you?”

“I’m telling you, she wanted to say something else.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“I don’t know well either.”

“If I really disappear, will you be heartbroken?”

“Yes, then who will stand in the goal?” I answered him laughing

“I don’t believe you, you wouldn’t even notice.”

“I would notice.”

“Mom wouldn’t notice, neither would Dad. Niaco doesn’t even understand yet.”

“Shut up, we’ll notice.”

“You won’t notice anything. Remember last year when I was at my godmother’s for a week? How was everyone here? Of course, everything was probably the same. If I completely disappear, nothing would even change. In the morning, Niaco will cry, Mom will wake up, and start fighting. Then Dad will wake up and he will start fighting too. Then you two will go collect scrap metal, and then you will fight again. The days will pass normally... months... pshh... years.... No one will notice that I’m not there. You guys don’t even need me for soccer, remember? You didn’t even let me play that day.”

After that, Gigo started doing such things, that I would blush from embarrassment. Every morning, in an exaggerated and artistic voice he would tell each of us: “Good morning!” And he would grin.

Then, almost every hour, he would repeat to Mom: “I love you, you’re so beautiful...” Mom was lost. The worst to see was when he stood over Dad’s bed and asked, “Would you care for some tea?” Dad swung a shoe at him.

I couldn’t watch all of this. I had seen in movies how some family members tell each other sweet words. But those are a different sort of family. In our house such phrases sounded silly. I won’t even mention how every few minutes he would throw down some hopelessly polite words like it was nothing. I had personally only heard this sort of talk from the Jehovah’s Witnesses who live nearby.

One time I asked Gigo:

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you acting like this?”

“I am trying to love you all.”

“You don’t love us?”

“Yeah, but you guys don’t know that. The day has to be different when I am here.”

“We have to beat up Nodara.” Gigo told me calmly.

“Are you crazy?”

“We definitely have to beat up someone, and Nodara gets on my nerves more than anyone else.”

“Why do we have to beat up anyone?”

“If we beat someone in the streets, we’ll get tired and we won’t fight at home anymore. If only Dad would beat someone else, then he would leave us alone...”

“We’re not going to beat anyone, Gigo.”

“Are you scared?”

“I’m not scared, it’s just that fighting, and beating someone up is not right.”

“But you beat me just fine, don’t you?”

“Sorry...”

“.....”

“It’s your fault. Don’t make me mad and I won’t beat you.”

“That’s a lie. You absolutely have to beat someone. Everyone is like that. That’s why it’s better to find someone bad for it.”

“Fine, let’s beat Nodara, tomorrow, after the game...”

“You better not be scared though. If you want, I’ll hit him first.”

“Ok, I promise.”

We sat for a few minutes in silence. Then Gigo started again:

“In five, ten, or twenty years, I wonder what we will be like.”

I couldn’t answer him. I couldn’t even imagine how we would be. Maybe we had some dreams, but I knew well that they would remain unfulfilled. This wasn’t anything tragic for us— as far as we knew, there wasn’t anyone around whose dreams had come true. I sat quietly and thought about Gigo’s question. I realized that from the beginning I only had one response: “like Dad.”