

ANA DABRUNDASHVILI

TBILISI, GEORGIA

I'm sitting on the kitchen sofa. Grandma is holding me tightly in her arms. We are both wrapped in blankets against the cold, but I am still cold. There is a smell of kerosene in the room from the red oil stove, the thing we use to warm up in winter. A candle on the table is melting. We don't have another. They say dad can't go outside and buy one because they are shooting. My brother is sitting at the table trying to do his homework; he is in year three. Mom tells him to stop it, that he can spoil his eyes in this light, but he won't. Dad approaches the window and looks out at the street. I also want to look, but grandma wouldn't let me. I am bored. It must be 1992, the end of the Soviet Union, the beginning of an independent republic of Georgia. I am three years old.

I know almost nothing about the political tension in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, nor about the collapse of the first Georgian government. I also don't know that my dad gets up at 6am every morning to stand in a long queue for bread and milk, which are sold for special coupons called "talons". All I know is that I don't like my elder brother's old clothes that I have to wear and I don't believe that the radiators we have at home used to be hot, although mom says so. I also know that I should not come close to the big canister standing on the stove where we boil water for taking baths. It's dangerous.

When grandpa sees I'm bored he asks me to come to him saying he has something special for me. I already know what that "something special" is. He gives me a few million "kurons", Georgian money at the time. "Oh, three years old and already a millionaire," dad says. I give him a satisfied smile and run to my secret place where I hide my millions from Gio, my elder brother. I look at these green, red and blue papers, sorted in green, red and blue groups, with pride and feel myself completely contented with my life. Later on, I learn that this is called inflation and my millions are nearly worthless.

In the morning mom wakes me up. I have to go to kindergarten. I hate kindergarten, although there is one guy I like. But he doesn't like me. He is already four and thinks

I am too small. Once he promised to show me a real gun. He said that his dad's friends sometimes bring guns and parents hide them behind the wardrobe. I am so glad he wants to show me a gun! Next day, I wake up and pester mom to hurry up. But the boy brings nothing. He says that his dad caught him when he was taking the gun. He slapped him and told him never to come close to the wardrobe again. I feel so sorry for him that I give him the last chocolate I had stolen from grandma's Christmas supply, although later I think it would have been better had I eaten it myself. Maybe, I don't like him that much!

I wanted to tell mom about the gun but she was so late to pick me up that I forgot. She is always late. She has a job. That's odd, because other moms and sometimes even dads have no jobs and they are always on time. So I think that having a job is bad, especially for moms. Mom knows I hate her being late, so she kisses me and tells me what she has been telling me throughout my life: "You know everything in this country has been a mess since the day you were born. But in a couple of years, when you are older, everything will be OK."

I am older and I go to school. There is no more shooting in the streets. People are not connected with military groups and don't hide guns behind their wardrobes. We have a new president, an old man with white hair just like my grandfather. We used to like him too as we liked the first one when he started, but now we don't. It's because we don't have electricity, hot water, warmth or money. We haven't got our lost territories back. In a word, we don't have anything and we think that all this is his fault.

I am a millionaire no longer. We have a new currency called the "lari". Mom and dad give me one lari per day and I can buy some food in the school buffet. But I don't buy food. On breaks I skip school with my friends and run to a market where an old man with an amputated hand sells posters. While we look with amazement at glittering images

of Leonardo DiCaprio and quarrel who will marry him, the man tells us his story. He says that during Soviet times he was an engineer and didn't need to sell these stupid things to us stupid kids. But now, this stupid government doesn't give him money so he has this stupid job to support his stupid daughter who married some stupid alcoholic and has three stupid kids now, kids who are just as stupid as we are. People usually like talking about who they were during Soviet times. Generally, they like talking about the past. Teachers often say how glorious Georgia was in the past and how proud we should feel to be Georgian.

Actually, all teachers talk about is Georgia, about the religion that helped Georgia to survive and about the three lari monthly payment we must bring to fund the school. So, lessons are no fun.

Each morning, when my brother and I take the elevator, we cross our fingers and ask God to switch the light off while we are inside. If it happens we jump and shout "YEAH!!" and start hammering the door, knowing that it will take at least fifteen minutes until somebody hears us; then another two hours until they manage to open the doors and get us out. And thus a day off from school! But it hardly ever happens. After school my brother gets lost somewhere with his friends and I go home alone. I re-start my morning's conversation with God; this time I ask him to bring electricity back, so that I can watch TV. My heart beats faster till I turn the corner and look at the bulb in front of a neighbor's garage. If it's on, it means we have electricity. Usually it's off. This God is stupid! He understands everything the wrong way. Annoyed by God I stumble up thirteen floors on foot and spend the next few hours rummaging through stuff. Sometimes I just pick out a book of poems and read them out loud, or I count the money my parents hide under their bed sheets (nobody trusts banks if there are any) to make sure we are not too poor.

Evenings are always the same. Gathered around the stove, wrapped in blankets, my brother playing guitar, parents and grandparents talking about corruption in government, neighbours coming to talk about corruption in government, everybody waiting for electricity so that we can turn on the TV and watch protest rallies in the streets demanding the end of corruption in government.

Nobody is too small to know about corruption. For me it's teachers who don't give you good marks if you don't attend additional classes after school, for which you have to pay. For my brother it's \$200 dollars you have to pay to get a school diploma with all A's without the need to study or attend class.

For my friend's dad, it's paying money to criminal groups to get his stolen car back.

Sometimes, when protest rallies come along our street, we all go to the balcony to watch. Dad lifts me up to have a better view and mom tells me the same thing again, thinking she has never told me before: "You know everything in this country has been a mess since the day you were born. But in a couple of years, when you are older, everything will be OK."

I'm getting older and older and it's never OK enough. If you want to know the full impact of post-Soviet events on citizens you just need to take public transport and accidentally step on the foot of a middle-aged woman. She will explode with all the anger of her life: the unemployed husband, lazy kids, ill mother, low salary, abusive government, useless previous government, immature first government, bloody communists.

And she will be happy to find you, who so unmercifully stepped on her foot, responsible for all the misfortunes of her life. Then she will calmly give her fate back into the hands of God and continue staring out the window, dreaming about some magical change.

Funnily enough, there always is change. As mom puts it, "since the day I was born" we are moving from one radical change to another, ultimately ending with new radical change.

Even funnier, Georgia remains the most comfortable place for me to live, with warm memories of dark family evenings, the impossibility of remembering the names of permanently changing officials, the high risk of getting stuck in an elevator, with my family and friends being the only stability in my life, and the challenge and fear of the future, using every little opportunity given me not to become part of another lost generation.

When somebody mentions independent Georgia, the first thing that comes to my mind is a documentary depicting the official declaration of independence, with the first Georgian president raising his shaking fist in the air, shouting "GOD BLESS INDEPENDENT GEORGIA" and the flow of applause that followed. Who amongst that overjoyed people could have ever imagined that Georgia would get stuck forever between a Soviet past and a European future, taking steps back and forth, over and over again?!

✉ anachoki@gmail.com