

An aerial photograph of a historic city, likely Tbilisi, Georgia. The city is built on a hillside, featuring a prominent stone fortress with high walls and a central tower. Below the fortress, there are numerous traditional buildings with red-tiled roofs and white walls. A river flows through the foreground, and the background shows rolling hills and a clear sky. The overall scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

HARD
BY A
GREAT
FOREST

LEO

A NOVEL

VARDIASHVILI



**HARD
BY
A
GREAT
FOREST**

Leo Vardiashvili

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

NEW YORK

2024



RIVERHEAD BOOKS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

penguinrandomhouse.com



Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Bloomsbury Publishing, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, 2024

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vardiashvili, Leo, author.

Title: Hard by a great forest / Leo Vardiashvili.

Description: New York : Riverhead Books, 2024. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2023010792 (print) | LCCN 2023010793 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593545034 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593545058 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Domestic fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PR6122.A368 H37 2024 (print) | LCC PR6122.A368 (ebook) | DDC 823/.92—dc23/eng/20230517

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023010792>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023010793>

Cover design: Tal Goretsky

Cover images: (city) Tawatchai Prakobkit / iStock / Getty Images Plus; (river) Bruev / iStock / Getty Images Plus

BOOK DESIGN BY MEIGHAN CAVANAUGH, ADAPTED FOR EBOOK BY MAGGIE HUNT

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146060248

*To my parents—Tina, Malkhaz, and Ketino.
I could live a thousand years and never have the courage you do.*

A man without history is a tree without roots.

Anzor Sulidze

WHERE'S EKA?

Where's Eka?" We must have asked a thousand times.
Our mother stayed so we could escape.

See, war trumps most things. You'll find that a volley of AK-47 rounds fired right down your street will override almost any other concern. We heard gunfire by night and saw brass twinkling on the pavement in the morning, as though it had rained shell casings all over Tbilisi. Sounds manageable so far.

But when a stray tank shell breaks the sound barrier by your bedroom window, screams on, and deletes the corner grocery shop and the entire family living above it, you'll begin to make plans. Our parents, Irakli and Eka, made plans to get us all out, divorce be damned.

Getting out of the country meant shady bribes, stolen travel stamps, and counterfeit certificates. What money the family scratched together was barely enough for one parent and us children. Eka didn't even have a passport. Together we couldn't leave the country.

Meanwhile, the civil war was warming up, bullet holes in familiar places and people no longer a surprise. We had to go. Eka stayed and we escaped with Irakli.

That's how we became motherless, Sandro and I. I was eight and Sandro was two years older. At that age, the difference was a whole ocean of experience. Even so, Sandro had no inkling of what motherless meant, and neither did I.

There was no fanfare upon our arrival on the capitalist shores of the UK. They put us straight in a refugee shelter in Croydon. In that cold warehouse of bunk beds, communal toilets, and food tokens, nervous faces haunted the hallways.

Eventually, somewhere deep in the guts of the Home Office machine, gears clicked, a screen flickered to life, and we were granted refugee status, with "Tottenham, N17" printed on our case file.

In those early days we floundered in a city we didn't know. Tottenham in 1992 wasn't the London we'd imagined. There were no top hats, no smog, no Holmes, no Watson, no ladies, no gents, and no afternoon tea. Not for us.

We lived in a different London. In our London, people swore and spat, drank, quarreled, and laughed in fretful bursts. They spoke strange words in accents we couldn't parse. They walked bowed by the weight of mouths-to-feed, bills-to-pay, and how-many-days-till-payday?

Our da walked among them. Our Irakli—a man out at sea without a compass, searching for a woman he'd managed to lose twice. First, he lost Eka to a divorce shrouded in mystery. Then, to a civil war that reunited and parted them in one breath.

“Where’s Eka?”

“Soon, boys. We’ll get her back,” Irakli would say. A promise not yet a lie.

He broke his back trying to buy Eka a way out. He picked fruit, painted walls, stacked shelves in warehouses, sweated and toiled in nameless, windowless factories across North London.

Those jobs wore him down in subtle, vital ways. We watched him erode. Once, he fell asleep at the table, spoon halfway to his mouth. We laughed and laughed. Sometimes you have to laugh at a thing to strip it of its power.

It’s hard to save thousands by pounds and pennies. It’s harder to send what you’ve scratched together to a country on fire. Georgia was eating itself alive—no banks to speak of, no working postal system. Those of us who’d escaped were not exactly keen to go back to a war zone.

Somehow, Irakli found someone willing to fly back there, for a fee. He was a tall, skinny man with earnest eyes. He looked honest and said the right things. Held his cigarette just so. He ate our food and drank our drink. He took the pounds and pennies meant for Eka and left, smiling and shaking hands. For a while, we stopped asking where Eka was.

I don’t remember the honest man’s name, but in my dreams he’s died a thousand deaths by my hand. Eka never got the money and we never saw the honest man again. Irakli drank, and one night from the bedroom we heard him break the coffee table. The next morning, we found the table glued back together and Irakli gone back to work.

His efforts to buy us a mother turned frantic. Tense telephone conversations, sometimes Georgian and sometimes broken English, muffled by a closed door and often cut short by the angry boom of Irakli’s voice.

We found strange clues around the house. Phone cords ripped from sockets, strange dents in the plasterwork, red bank letters ripped up and stuffed under the sofa, and the faint shrapnel left behind by crockery smashed and hurriedly cleaned up.

“Clumsy Da” was all he’d say. “Clumsy, clumsy me.”

We didn’t understand it then, but we do now. Irakli was trying everything to buy Eka’s freedom. And he was failing.

“Where’s Eka?” We didn’t want to ask, but we couldn’t help it.

“I’m working on it, boys.”

Almost a year after our arrival in London, we started school, and that cost money. The old washing machine broke that same winter and that cost money. Irakli dropped a cinder block on his toes and for a lean two months he couldn’t work. That cost a lot of money. Some money did make it to Eka, but never enough. Things back in Georgia cost money too. And so it went.

Over the next six years, we lost Eka piecemeal. We lost her to gas bills and groceries, bus passes and pencil cases, books and school uniforms.

Irakli’s promise slowly curdled until we finally got the call on a sunny January morning. Eka’s dead. We breathed a guilty little sigh of relief. There was no need to ask anymore. Irakli could stop promising us lies.

As we inched our way through a clammy, snowless British winter, someone turned the volume down on him. He'd drift into the room, look around, and leave without saying anything. He'd watch TV with disconnected eyes, coffee mug grown cold in his hand. The crockery stopped disappearing.

Our da aged a decade that winter, right in front of our eyes. Relief spiked with guilt shocked all his hair gray. We never once saw him cry, but he often rushed out of the room on some sudden errand.

"Ever been struck by lightning, my friend?" he'd say if you met him back then.

Crazy Eastern European, you'd think—a fever glint in his eyes and an odd accent you couldn't place.

"There's more chance of being struck by lightning than meeting a Georgian outside of Georgia."

Maybe you'd offer a polite laugh.

"Did the calculations myself." He'd tap his temple. "You're very lucky, my friend."

His eyes would gleam.

"But you're ve-ery unlucky too."

He'd wait for you to ask why.

"Because the odds of winning the lotto are much better. You could have been a millionaire, my friend. Instead, you met me."

He'd laugh, loud and from the heart. You would too.

"Let me pour you a drink, to apologize."

. . .

AFTER THAT CALL ABOUT EKA, it was hard to find the right words about her and even harder to say them aloud. So we made an unspoken pact to never mention our mother.

That pact served us well for eleven long years. But last year, Irakli started to break the agreement. He'd talk about places he'd been with Eka, the parks and cafés where they spent time, the trails and paths they cut through Tbilisi. Day by day, he lost interest in the future and his eyes filled up with the past.

He often looked at flights to Tbilisi. A couple of times he bought tickets, but didn't use them. He didn't even pack a bag. He seemed scared.

"Those people hold grudges past the grave."

He wouldn't tell us what he meant by "those people." We assumed he meant old friends or acquaintances we'd slighted by escaping when they couldn't.

On his next doomed attempt, Irakli packed a suitcase. He even left the house. He came back a few hours later, shamed and subdued. When they announced his flight, he admitted, he just stayed in his seat and watched everyone else board. When they called him by name on the Tannoy, he walked out.

Yet with every attempt, he edged closer, until one day he left for Heathrow and didn't return. We didn't hear from him until he landed in Tbilisi. His early reports from Georgia rambled with nervous energy, as though he had no way to get his heart around it all.

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing. I just can’t believe it,” he told us on the phone.

Exactly what he couldn’t believe, he struggled to explain. Sandro and I left him to it for two months. We were both in our twenties, with our own lives, and felt no great urge for a long-lost homeland.

Meanwhile, Irakli’s calls and emails began to falter, but we weren’t paying attention. His last email forced us to:

My boys,

I did something I can’t undo.

I need to get away from here before those people catch me. Maybe in the mountains I’ll be safe.

I left a trail I can’t erase. Do not follow it.

I love you, best I can.

Irakli

The email made no sense. Something ill hid among those words. “Those people”? Who was chasing Irakli? What trail? As for mountains, most of Georgia is a damn mountain.

We called and emailed, over and over, and got no response. Sandro spent weeks harassing the Tbilisi police, the British embassy, and anyone else who’d listen. He even convinced a charity for the homeless to put up posters around Tbilisi. The posters had Irakli’s picture on them and a message asking him to get in touch.

Missing-persons posters have that unmistakable air of crying over spilled milk, but I didn’t say anything to Sandro. Looking for Irakli was taking all of his time. Maybe Irakli saw the posters, maybe he didn’t. Maybe he’d left Tbilisi by then and maybe he hadn’t. There was no way to know, not all the way from London. And that’s exactly where Sandro’s thinking went—charge to the rescue, as usual.

He decided to go to Georgia himself. Not a soul left back there to help him—our family had gone extinct over the seventeen years we were absent. Grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, and cousins blinked out like cheap Christmas lights. We missed all their funerals. Refugees returning to the country they’ve escaped raises eyebrows. By the time of Eka’s death, there was no family left to gather at her grave. We’re not even sure who buried her, or where exactly.

Grief without closure has a way of fucking with you. There’s an ancient, bone-deep instinct we all share: when those we love die, it’s important that we see *evidence*. That’s what funerals are. They’re for our own good.

Maybe some ancient, hateful creature put a curse on our family. Maybe not. Either way, Eka’s side of the family—the Sulidzes—they died out fast. Irakli’s side—the Donauris—were already decimated before we even escaped Tbilisi. Those are the two halves of me. I’m half Eka and half Irakli. Just like my name—Saba Sulidze-Donauri.

With that need for closure left hungry, I lived my life in London constantly thinking of the dead. I’d wonder what they were doing of an evening, what plans they had for the weekend. Then I’d remember they were gone—a snow-globe miniature of the first time I heard the news. Bite-size heartache.

I became obsessed with them. I caught glimpses of them in strangers' faces, heard their voices cut through the din on the Tube. In the sly gaps between my thoughts, the dead came to life. And I liked it.

I'd imagine what Lena might say in a given situation, or Eka, or Anzor, or Surik. Soon enough, their voices crept into my head. I spoke to them when I needed to and soon they spoke back:

Anzor, my superhero uncle, who taught me everything useful I know. He donated two fingers to the Socialist Cause via the painful method of a faulty hydraulic press in a Soviet car factory. His was the slow, calm voice of logic.

Lena, my spartan grandma. Two world wars, a steady diet of Stalinism, Communist Pioneer camps, and being shot at by German soldiers turned her spine to steel.

Eka, the mother who stayed behind to let her children escape. Both our hearts broke when we spoke.

Surik, our drunkard neighbor and my first friend. He was like a big brother to Eka and always managed to make me laugh, no matter what. Surik spoke to me whenever he felt like it.

Nino, the keeper of my darkest secret. My sister in all the ways that matter but blood. Her voice the hardest to quiet.

I knew it was cruel to keep these crude caricatures alive, their deaths forever pending. Eventually, one by one, I silenced them for good. It hurt me as much as it hurt them.

Anyway, the point is there would be no welcome party waiting for Sandro at the airport. But he could never leave Irakli out there alone. Nearly thirty by then, Sandro was rattling around in a hollow, dead-end department of the civil service. Nothing to his name but books and a rented apartment. So, one day, he paused his London life, packed a bag, bought a one-way ticket to Tbilisi, and left.

At first, we spoke daily. He told me about the hassle he was having trying to track Irakli. With his *Sulidze-Donauri* surname now stamped in a shiny British passport, the Tbilisi police wouldn't help him much.

Irakli was also on a British passport, and it was soon clear the police wouldn't lift a finger unless pressured by the British embassy, and the embassy wasn't keen on doing a job that the Georgian police should have handled.

"Sometimes people just disappear," the detective told Sandro and smiled. Something off about him, Sandro told me.

He started his own search where we used to live, in the dusty maze of Sololaki, adrift among its ramshackle streets and crumbling buildings. He heard someone matching Irakli's description had been seen in shady neighborhood bars. But nothing came of it.

Sandro put up more posters. Still nothing. He found a hostel owner who recognized Irakli's picture. Maybe he stayed at the hostel, months ago, or maybe not. Another dead end.

Then there was the shopkeeper who definitely remembered Irakli, but only because Irakli had burst into his tiny shop looking for camping gear.

"Man looked unhinged," the shopkeeper told Sandro. "Looking for tents and sleeping bags where I sell cigarettes and magazines."

Sandro started talking about coming back to London. He'd been out there for weeks, all alone, looking for traces Irakli might have left in Tbilisi months ago. He seemed desperate for a clue, a hint, anything to keep him going. And I guess he found it, because things took a turn.

Sandro's emails started to shrink just like Irakli's had. He wouldn't talk on the phone. He sold his laptop and would only write from internet cafés. Even then, just a few words at a time.

The last email I got from him said this:

I found Irakli's breadcrumb trail. At his old flat in Sololaki. No time to explain.
I'll email when I know more.

Sandro

And that's it—I haven't heard from Sandro since. Weeks have sailed by. My frantic emails and calls to the Georgian police, the British embassy, and Tbilisi hospitals got me no further. The whole time, I knew what had to be done. I just didn't want to face it. . . .

. . .

WELL, HERE I AM NOW, facing it. I'm sat in a taxi, in the middle of Tbilisi, Georgia. The driver, Nodar by name, is chain-smoking like his life depends on it. Something strange is happening in this city. I feel like I've missed some crucial piece of information—some unknown-unknown. There are a lot of people in the streets for this time of night. They huddle by streetlights, smoking, talking, and looking over their shoulders.

The deeper we go into Tbilisi, the stranger it gets. There are empty police cars parked on corners, their lights flashing silently. Nodar drives past a row of parked pickup trucks with muddy, canine shapes piled in the back.

"Are those dogs?" I ask.

Nodar ignores me as he peers through his windshield. Up ahead, another silent flashing police car blocks our way. Behind it I glimpse the swaying glimmer of water where water doesn't belong. Nodar swerves to avoid a large apron of silt that's somehow snuck onto the road. The moist mud mutes the rattle of the car's suspension. That's when I look up and see it.

There's a rhino standing in the road directly in front of us. Nodar frowns and leans on the brakes. The rhino turns its huge head away from Nodar's headlights in an oddly human gesture. Behind the rhino is a mangled shop front, all glass and chrome. "Swatch," the broken sign says. The neat little display has spilled its twinkling guts onto the pavement. Must be the rhino's handiwork.

"That a fuckin' rhino? In the road?"

A clutch of people stands a safe distance away and watches the animal. A policeman steps forward and waves at us to come through.

"That's not a rhino. That's Boris."

"What?"

"Boris the Hippopotamus."

A wry smile from Nodar.

“No, I mean, why’s it here?”

Nodar turns his balding head toward me. “You don’t know, do you?” He chuckles.

“Know what?”

“Big mess, brother. The flood yesterday washed the zoo downriver. All the animals escaped. Wolves running wild by the airport, ostriches roaming around, penguins in the Mtkvari, a tiger up in Sololaki.”

Nodar lists these things while squinting and turning the wheel with his palm. A cigarette hangs from his lips as he tiptoes the car around Boris the Hippopotamus.

“Welcome to Georgia.”

Boris’s flank goes past my window. He’s the size of a small van. I can smell him. I lean out and let my fingers run over his gray tree-bark skin. Boris turns his head and shows me his huge, sparse teeth and his fist-size black eyes.

“Saw these idiots on my way to the airport two hours ago. They’ll be herding that poor animal all night.”

Nodar grunts and changes down a gear. The car judders but keeps going.

“My place is nearby. Five minutes, brother.”

Just as we turn the corner, there’s a loud crack. I turn to see the hippo’s neck sprout a little red flower on a white stem. A tranquilizer dart. No reaction from Boris—he doesn’t even flinch. He just follows our car with his ink-black eyes, as if to say, “Beware.”

Wait, I should tell you how I got to Tbilisi in the first place.

. . .

BACK IN LONDON, in my little flat-share on Holloway Road, I packed for an adventure unknown. When I finished, I sat back amid the glossy pamphlets, forms, branded pens and key chains, and all the other traveling-salesman garbage that had settled on every flat surface in my room.

My job was to travel the country and give people bad news. In corporate, air-conditioned meeting rooms, I told my audiences that someday they would die. Yes, you in the back—you too. A Domsday Peddler, according to Sandro.

Like a good snake-oil man, though, I had miracle cures to sell. I offered pensions and life insurance, investments and savings accounts. Useless acronyms, yield rates and percentages, sold to profit my employer. But also sold to stop these people from *really* absorbing my message and walking out of their jobs.

Every evening I’d wash these things from myself in the shower, like a coal miner might scrub grime from his body. Afterward, I’d still believe that by some sneaky fairy-tale trick, I’d dodge the system.

Anyway, all that was a flimsy distraction. I was fooling no one. I was about to return to a place I’d worked so hard to forget.

Deep into the long Tube pilgrimage to Heathrow, at the arse end of the Piccadilly line, I took out the antianxiety pills my housemate gave me to help me sleep on the flight. Two innocent-blue pills wrapped in tissue paper. Among unfamiliar stations—Boston Manor, Osterley, and a

procession of Hounslows—I doubled the dose and swallowed both pills. I hoped they’d stop my heart fluttering the way it was.

The effects came on slow but forceful. By the time I got to Heathrow my whole spine was soaked in magic. I wafted through the duty-free and found myself in a queue. At gate 19-A, I fell in love with the woman checking the boarding passes. She was a perfect porcelain doll—pale skin, crimson lipstick, dead eyes.

I caught her attention. Her eyes unglazed and focused on me. No wonder. I was standing there half-melted and staring at her unblinking. I saw a cute frown gather on her brow, like a tiny stormfront. All I could think about was planting a big, fat kiss on those miniature red lips and getting arrested right after.

“Are you OK, sir?” Her eyes scanned me head to toe.

“I’m a nervous flier. The sleeping pill.” I pointed at my head. “I think it’s kicking in.”

I felt her attention go, like the sun slipping behind a cloud.

“Better get to your seat then, sir.”

She gave me a disinterested smile and motioned me toward the door. I took a few steps toward it, stopped, readjusted my aim, and tried again. She didn’t notice.

When I found my seat, the pills *really* got to work. As we took off, I closed my eyes and erased the whole world and everything in it.

“Excuse me, sir.” Someone nudged my shoulder. “Sir?”

When I opened my eyes, all I could see was my knees. My head felt like a concrete lump and my lips were drool-dried shut.

“I’m sorry, sir. We’re landing in Kyiv. Straighten and lock your seat, please.”

The Kyiv airport was deserted, apart from the occasional chain-smokers keeping vigil in the smoking booths. Built in the early days of the Soviet Union, the Kyiv airport of 2010 was like time-traveling back to the USSR, minus the hammer-and-sickle flags and Lenin portraits. I was stuck in that airport for hours, waiting for my connecting flight.

That’s where I first felt something wasn’t right. As I wandered through the windowless coarse-concrete corridors, someone followed. It was a surly man, wearing a leather jacket and an unhappy face. He had nothing with him, no bags, no shopping, not a thing. I thought that was odd.

He sat at the other end of the food court and watched me shove lukewarm capitalist Burger King in my face. He didn’t eat anything. Then he followed me to the smoking booth, where we chain-smoked three cigarettes each. He was halfway through a sentence before I realized he was talking to me.

“. . . go to Tbilisi?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

He gave me a mournful look, as though he felt sorry for something that hadn’t happened yet. I couldn’t quite tell through the cigarette smoke, but his eyes might have been different colors, one blue and one green.

“I said, do you *have* to go to Tbilisi?”

“What? Yes. Why?”

He shook his head. “Tbilisi’s not the place for you. You’ll find nothing but trouble there, friend. Turn back, go home.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m nobody.”

He stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette and walked out. I tried to follow, but I lost him. Later, I saw him from the airplane window, talking to the boarding staff as my plane taxied away. I dismissed him as a sleep-deprived airport nutjob.

Surrounded by sleepy Georgian mumblings, I sat awake the whole flight to Tbilisi and stared at the tip of the wing, blinking a lonely red out there in the huge darkness. The air hostess made her rounds, stopping and murmuring at each seat in Georgian. When she got to mine, her eyes flickered away as though she was trying to remember something she memorized as a child. Then she straightened up and composed her face like she was about to recite a poem.

“Every-sing to your liking, sir?” she said.

This drew a few glances from the other passengers. I looked down at my clothes and wondered why she picked me out to be an English speaker.

“Yes, thank you,” I said in Georgian.

She looked down at the clipboard in her hands.

“Are you Mr. Sulidze-Donauri?”

I looked around as though “Mr. Sulidze-Donauri” was someone I’d seen a second ago but couldn’t spot anymore.

“Uh, yes.”

“Thank you, enjoy your flight,” she said and left.

She didn’t ask for anyone else’s name. Just mine. I should have known something was wrong.

When the airplane wheels hit the Tbilisi tarmac, everyone clapped. As we taxied to the terminal, I caught a glimpse of a cluster of lights in the distance. The city of Tbilisi, my long-lost birthplace. I stared at it, dumbstruck, while my belly filled with ice. I was beginning to realize just how fucking ridiculous an expedition this was.

Outside, the night air smelled like hot tarmac and spilled gas. I’d only been to the Tbilisi airport once, when I was eight. I was leaving then, wrestling with a Stalin-era leather suitcase held together with two belts. I remember heaving it onto a trolley, proud that I was strong enough.

Everyone was there—Irakli, Eka, Sandro, even my grandma and my uncle. It was the last time we were all together.

It must have been something, that night we left. I can’t imagine what was going through their heads—sending the three of us off to some vague, faraway place where “things are better.” That’s all they would say: “Things are better over there.”

What things? Better than what? I didn’t understand why I couldn’t just stay home.

Georgia broke away from the Soviet Union and became a republic in 1991. Crudely formed parties fought over the throne to this newly minted “republic.” It didn’t take long for the guns to come out. That very winter, we plunged headlong into a bitter, disorderly civil war.

By the time we arrived at the airport that night, six months into the war, among hundreds of strained-smile families just like ours, Tbilisi was a living nightmare. No electricity, no gas, no running water. Go out for bread and you were just as likely to catch a bullet as a loaf. They say almost half the population fled the country in those days. Most, never to return.

Lit so bright by the fluorescent airport lights, my family looked shamed by the shabbiness of their clothes, the dirt in their worry lines. Those harsh lights stripped them of the superpowers I knew they had. They looked worried and hesitant. They looked fragile. I was only dimly aware that something important was happening, while around me hearts broke.

Only Irakli, Sandro, and I would board the flight we waited for. The rest of my family would never clap their eyes on us again. They just didn't know it yet. Well, Eka had Sandro in her lap when I caught a strange look on her face. Maybe she knew.

. . .

ALMOST TWO DECADES LATER I found myself back at the same airport. At border control, the guy behind the desk raised an eyebrow at my passport. He picked up the phone and said my name. A few seconds later an airport guard appeared at my side, holding an assault rifle to his chest. He escorted me away from the queue to a side office, where a stern woman in surgical gloves was already going through my suitcase.

"Random check." She barely looked up. "Take a seat, please."

I watched her grope her way through my things. Leaving my clothes piled on the table, she snapped off her gloves and threw them in the bin.

"Purpose of visit?"

"Holiday."

"Holiday," she deadpanned.

"Yes," I said.

She raised an eyebrow. "Follow me, please."

She took me next door, where I got fingerprinted by a doughy technician wearing a lab coat two sizes too small.

"You need my fingerprints?"

"Random check, sir," the woman said behind me.

The technician looked at her sleepily, then back at me and nodded.

"Yes," he concurred.

He handed me a wet-wipe for my inky fingers. I was marched back to the first room, where the stern woman questioned me. She wasn't happy that I had no address to give her. She asked why I hadn't booked anywhere to stay and what I was planning to do. Those were all great questions that I didn't have answers to.

I filled out a form while she packed my suitcase with more care than I had. Just when I started thinking this really was a Georgian-style random check, she handed me a business card.

"What's this?"

Detective Kelbakiani, Tbilisi Metropolitan Police, Sololaki District.

"Thank you for your cooperation," she said, while I stared at the business card.

“What is this?”

“Please visit Detective Kelbakiani as soon as possible.”

Random check, my arse.

“Why?” I said.

“He’ll return your passport to you.”

They’d pulled me away so fast I forgot they never gave my passport back. Before I could slap together a sentence in protest, the woman handed me over to the armed guard, who marched me and my newly packed bag to the same border-control man.

“Oo-elcome,” he said in English and grinned.

I could see my passport on his desk. I paused, but the armed guard nudged me forward. That nudge sent me, rattling and nervous, through the meager duty-free and to a flimsy set of automatic doors flanked by more guards with machine guns.

I took a deep breath, stepped through the doors, and almost collided with a wall of eager, waiting faces. Automatically I scanned them for a familiar one. But they wilted into anonymity, one by one, under my gaze. My bag tried to tip itself over and broke the spell. No one was waiting for me there. I wrenched my bag onto its wheels and aimed myself at the final set of doors to Georgia proper.

Outside, I found myself surrounded by an even larger crowd of people hugging, kissing, talking excitedly, and haggling with a small regiment of taxi drivers. I stood aside and tried to take it all in while fiddling with a cigarette that I just could not light.

I stood there a long time, thinking in narrowing, accelerating circles. If I could smoke, if I could just light the fucking cigarette, maybe I could slow things down. I scraped my thumb raw on my lighter and produced nothing but sparks.

I let the lighter slide through my fingers. The words *panic attack* sliced through my head. I felt my skull drain of blood. My fingers started to tingle. My pulse pounded in my jaw. My breath was uneven, shallow. That was the cruel pause at the lip of the roller coaster. It was coming.

Everything around me slowed and froze. My eyes came to rest on a dented communal ashtray, overflowing with cigarette butts. This was it—the ugly sight the panic attack would sear into my memory.

Suddenly, I heard a voice cut through the muddy hubbub like a knife.

“*Saba.*” It winked silver.

I recognized it. It was one I’d silenced long ago. It was Surik! Surik, my drunken accomplice, charging to my rescue. Surik *ex machina*, whose house smelled like old newspapers, mothballs, and secrets.

“*Vai, vai, vai! Look at these balding hyenas.*”

“*Surik?*”

My eyes welled up.

“*Who’d you expect, Father fuckin’ Christmas?*”

“*You’re back.*”

“*Thought you could use the help. Want me to leave?*”

“No.”

“*Vai, look at this mess. More taxi drivers than passengers.*”

The crowd of taxi drivers shifted and churned, digesting a new wave of arrivals. Feeling the blood return to my brain, I watched them swallow a blithe tourist whole. Oversize backpack and all—he vanished. I was just happy to have a friend with me, even if imaginary.

“*Imaginary’s better than nothing,*” Surik said.

“*Help me, Surik.*”

“*You don’t need help, Saba. Pull the dry thumb out your arse. Get moving. Don’t matter which way—any way is good. The rest is momentum.*”

That’s when I noticed a man eyeing me. He stalked through the crowd, downwind and watchful. He paused often, so I wouldn’t spook.

“*Here he comes.*”

Finally, he surfaced beside me, lifted his hairy arm and put a hand on my shoulder in one quick movement. With his other hand he lit the cigarette still dangling from my lips. Not a word was said. He watched me try to inhale half a Mayfair Light in one drag. The corners of his eyes wrinkled as he smiled.

“Thanks.”

Surprised, he took his hand off my shoulder and leaned back for a better look.

“You Georgian?” He scratched his chin with an audible rasp. “You don’t look it.”

“I know.”

This made him chuckle.

“But you look like you need a taxi.” He glanced at my bag. “Where’s your people?”

“My people?”

“The usual airport welcome committee. Mother, father, auntie, uncle, cousin, dog, cat . . .”

“Oh, it’s just me.”

Those wrinkles at the corners of his eyes again.

“Alright, then. Let’s go, brother.”

He slapped me on the back and set me in motion almost against my will. We walked through the garrison of taxi drivers.

“Nodar, Nodar! Does he know he’ll be pushing you down the motorway?” someone said, and there was a smattering of laughter.

When I saw the taxi, I got the joke.

“*I never thought I’d see one of these shit-buckets again.*” Surik chuckled.

The car was a black GAZ Volga. At least half a century old, it was covered in grime you can’t wash off without taking the paint with it. There were mud splatters on the wheel arches, and the rear bumper was tied in place with blue nylon rope.

The taxi driver creaked the trunk open and threw my bag in.

“I’m Nodar.”

“Saba.” I shook his hand.

He nodded at his dinosaur of a car. “Ugly as sin, brother. But God loves ugly.” He stroked the flank of the car like it was a racehorse. “Back door’s jammed; sit up front.”

The Volga started up on the fourth attempt. Nodar drove away without even asking where I was going. He got us up to motorway speed by revving second gear until the whole car was shaking, and then jumped straight to fourth. The car made unholy noises.

“Where’s the fun in life if you have all the gears?”

With one hand on the wheel, Nodar patted down the front of his check shirt. He found a box of L&M cigarettes in his breast pocket and got one out with his teeth.

“Here, hold this, will you?” he said and, leaving no time for a response, let go of the wheel.

I clutched desperately at the hard-plastic wheel while he lit his cigarette.

“That’s better,” he said, exhaling smoke.

That’s how his outright assault on the box of L&Ms started. For a long time, I sat there like a bump on a log, staring out the window. Sirens and police car lights whipped past in the other direction. An ambulance shrieked by doing about twice our speed. It left behind a wake of ringing silence.

“You alright, brother?” Nodar said.

“Where are they going?”

“Nowhere good, brother.”

He shrugged and flipped the radio on. An odd station. A sleepy, disinterested voice read out a never-ending list of messages sent in by listeners—anonymous love notes, cryptic meeting places, and so on.

“What is that?”

Nodar smiled at the radio. “It’s like the internet for broke Georgians.”

“Talk radio?”

“Not really. They call it ‘If You’re Listening.’ Any message you’ve got, they’ll play it for free. No questions asked.”

I realized the radio dial was taped in place so it would never lose the station.

“*Definitely not the kind of thing an ex-Soviet serial killer would listen to,*” Surik said, and I almost laughed.

I looked over at Nodar, almost expecting him to have heard Surik. But Nodar was busy ignoring the road, steering with his knee while lighting another cigarette.

“So, where to, brother?” he said eventually.

“I need a hotel.”

“Which hotel?”

“Any.”

Nodar raised an eyebrow. “Hotels won’t take you this late. Or they’ll triple the price.”

He scratched his chin, thinking. “Brother, don’t worry. I rent out a place of mine. It’s empty, so you can have it tonight.”

“*Listen, Saba, when I said any way is good, I didn’t mean get yourself chopped up and tucked away in a freezer by some taxi maniac.*”

I shut out Surik’s voice. There was something about Nodar I wanted to trust.

“OK,” I said. “Thanks.”

“A guest is a gift from God,” he replied with an old Georgian proverb.

The road into Tbilisi took us through a Soviet ghost town—Didi Digomi. Didi Digomi lingers on the outskirts of the city like a leper exile. Built in the eighties to house thousands of people, it was going to have parks, playgrounds, an Olympic-size swimming pool complex, and even a football stadium. It was going to be glorious. But the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Didi Digomi ended up gloriously Communist instead—half-baked.

Fleshless ribcages of unfinished apartment blocks stood atop the hill in neat rows. The passing wind whistled through the yawning holes where people were supposed to have their cozy, warm living rooms, their standard-issue Soviet sofas, and their standard-issue Polish-made TVs.

As we drove past, I saw lights twinkling in some of the buildings.

“People live in there?” I said.

“Sure they do, brother.”

“How? There’s nothing there.”

Nodar sighed. “Ossetia refugees. It’s better than what they’ve left behind.”

As we entered the city of Tbilisi, I began to recognize things—a crumbling street corner, or a building, or a peculiar twist of the road. At the same time, I didn’t recognize a damn thing. The way your teeth feel after the dentist leaves you with unfamiliar edges to snag your tongue on.

Tbilisi’s a city that was invaded, leveled, and rebuilt more than thirty times. Over the centuries, all manner of empires and their unhinged rulers had their way with the city—the Ottomans, the Byzantines, the Russians. As a result, Tbilisi architecture’s schizophrenic. Stately facades and colonnades sit right alongside clusters of shabby wooden buildings leaning into each other like books on a lopsided shelf. Shiny, modern shop fronts, brand-new and gleaming, are conspicuously wedged among buildings from a different age altogether.

Away from main roads, the Tbilisi I remember showed through. Streetlights were sparse and dim. Houses watched us with an orange glow in their dusty windows. Overgrown oak trees crowded the pavement and invaded the road.

If you live in Tbilisi, you know the *texture* of the streets as well as you know the imperfections on the ceiling above your bed. Uneven, cracked pavements reward loyalty and punish newcomers with missteps and odd angles on which to trip.

Even from the safety of those shabby side streets, I caught glimpses of giant, sparkling skyscraper monoliths that didn’t belong there. I rolled the window down and let the air wash over me.

“*Smells like home, don’t it, Bublik?*”

Surik was right; it did smell like home. I forgot he used to call me Bublik. I didn’t feel like saying much else after that. We drove the rest of the way in silence.

. . .

SO THAT’S HOW I got here—nudged along by imaginary friends, strange taxi drivers, and Boris the Hippopotamus.

By the time we get to Nodar’s house, the night is losing its grip on the city. A faint warning of sunrise hangs over the horizon and thins the soothing darkness.

“*Let it happen, Bublik. The sun will rise—no avoiding that.*”