

Nana ABDULAZE

Akumi

excerpt from a novel

*I do not know where to begin or where to end, because life itself is beginningless and endless...
So I will begin just in the middle, and I will end just in the middle.*

- Osho, The Supreme Doctrine

Tbilisi, 2004

Gardener Zacharia was woken up by hearing his own name. He got up slowly. He was a very capable old man, but he had low blood pressure, so he stood up slowly in the mornings, to not feel dizzy.

His name was called from the other end of the garden. Sounding miserable and shaky, the caller must've been in trouble.

Zacharia slid his feet into worn out leather slippers and went out of the shed. The very first day of spring was dawning, winter was still stinging through the air.

"Zacharia! Zacharia!"

Akaki Mindeli was helping his wife down the stairs. She was clutching her stomach and groaning.

"Help me!"

Zacharia upheld steadied the woman. Akaki quickly jumped into the car, started the engine and turned it around. Zacharia helped the woman get into the car.

Nothing was said, no "thank you" or "drive safely" or "we'll be back soon." Zacharia thought it would've been better to call an ambulance, but he didn't say anything. He closed the gate and when he was turning around, he looked up at the apple tree, just because. And that's when he noticed ladybugs sitting on the branches. The gardener was surprised. He looked around at other plants. Ladybugs were resting everywhere. There was no breeze; the nature was silent and so were the ladybugs, as if they were waiting for something.

"They'll probably ask me to spray the plants with pesticide" thought Zacharia. "But I won't do it" he decided quickly. "I won't tell them, unless they notice it themselves and if they do, yeah, I'll say I'll do the spraying, but I won't."

There was no point in going back to sleep; the sun was about to rise. Zacharia went back inside the shed and added wood to the furnace.

* * *

“I’m going to die.”

Death was really nearby; she could feel its breathing right next to her ear. “I’m really going to die.”

The pain was spread through her entire body, not just the stomach. It was attacking her mind and messing up her thoughts. Both of her hands were on her stomach. She wanted to stop the pain there and not let it wonder around, but all efforts were in vain.

“We’re almost there, we’re almost there,” the husband was repeating endlessly, while holding the steering wheel with shaky hands.

The streets were empty, except for a beggar or two, sleeping on the sidewalks.

The husband roughly hit the brake, jumped out, opened the door and held out his hand for her. “Nice and slow, don’t be afraid, just like this...”

There was an oscitant woman with bright red lipstick in the reception area, chin cupped with the palm, leaning on her elbow.

“Help us!” yelled the husband.

The receptionist jolted up. “My wife...”

“She’s going into labor!” called out the receptionist to someone.

There were people all around them, lots of people, all of them with wearing white coats. They laid her down on a stretcher, and took her into a white room, reeking of medicine. The pain was weaker now.

Some doctor did her checkup.

“Yeah... Have her walk around. You have to endure it, ma’am.”

She raised up a little on the stretcher, but the pain strengthened again.

“Sit up, please. Massage her waist. It’ll help a little. It’s always like this, the first one is the hardest... Hold on, ma’am, the opening is the size of two fingers for now...”

She heard the words, but didn’t understand their meaning. The pain was drowning out her thoughts once again.

* * *

He could’ve never imagined that it’d be so nerve-wracking. He looked around at other husbands, pacing aimlessly in the waiting room, while he was fidgeting in his chair.

“Didn’t you hear the doctor say that all is going well?” “Yeah, man, but she’s so big...”

He wasn’t worried about that, the doctor didn’t say anything like that about his girl, but he was restless

regardless.

They didn't want this child, neither him nor his wife. His parents and relatives wanted it, but not him and his wife. He never even wanted to start a family of his own. He'd done it just because it was the norm, people started families at some point. He was scared anyways, he got so scared when he heard his wife's first groan that morning and realized it was time... He remembered one of his ignorant neighbors saying, that all laboring mothers are just a step away from their grave.

"But that was before. The medical field has had great advances, so it's less dangerous now." He thought, trying to calm down.

"It's not less dangerous. It's not something that anyone can fully control." Answered the fear. "Her sister-in-law had a c-section."

"What, really?!"

"Yeah, it was a breech baby."

He looked down at his wristwatch. Almost 6 AM. The second hand was moving, but the time seemed to be stuck still.

"I hope it goes well; I hope..."

He remembered the way Eka smiled when he gave her a bouquet of violets. The violets were wilted. He'd bought them two days before her birthday, just in case he wouldn't be able to find some prettier ones until then. They weren't married back then. They'd only seen each other once before, during a dinner. Later they found out that the dinner was arranged specifically for them to get to know each other. Ana loved violets, so he assumed, that she would too. He gave them to her and apologized for their state, saying he had them at his house for the past two days. That's when his future wife smiled. He wished Ana would smile like that. Ana was already gone; his parents were demanding from him to find a wife. So, he did.

A hospital attendant walked by and he rushed up to him to ask how his wife was doing. "Is it her first pregnancy?"

"What? Oh, yes, it's the first."

"You'll have to wait, sir, it's not a quick process," grinned the attendant.

And when he was about to tell him that he'd already been waiting for longer than an hour, he looked at the clock on a nearby wall and that's when he found out, that it hadn't even been ten minutes since they got here.

He sat down and covered his face with his hands. "Is yours a boy?"

"Twins, a boy and a girl, or so were we told." "Ours is also a boy."

"My niece thought so too, but she ended up having a girl, the doctors aren't always correct."

* * *

Zacharia was sitting on a bench, leaning on the shed's wall and sipping tea, while observing the apple tree. The ladybugs weren't moving. Zacharia was trying to remember if grandpa Vaska had ever said

anything about ladybugs.

“Look at them, they’re our little brothers and sisters. They move pollen from one flower to another with those tiny legs of theirs. If you see them, don’t you ever kill one, take care of them.” That was all that he could remember. In any case, grandpa Vaska has never mentioned anything about an invasion of ladybugs. Zacharia’s never seen anything like that in his apprentice years. He let out a sigh and almost fell off the bench.

This damned bench! He always forgets to fix it. He spent his whole life looking after plants and now he’s gawking at some ladybugs on an apple tree, God damn it.

“Maybe they’re dead,” he thought as he put down the teacup on the bench and walked up to the apple tree for a closer inspection. He extended his finger and when he was about to touch one of the red ladybugs with black spots, it backed away. The rest looked alarmed too. That’s when Zacharia noticed, that they all had different colors: Blues with white spots, greens with black spots, whites with black spots... He couldn’t find two that looked the same.

“God bless them. They’re just as stunning as Christ’s garments.”

The sun came up and the sky had a pink tint. The ladybugs started to look more alive, moving around and bumping into each other. Zacharia looked at the other trees, the ladybugs were all around. The gardener took a deep breath of the cold breeze coming from the east.

* * *

She knew it was over when she heard the cry. “I think it’s a girl.”

“You “think”?! Let me have a look.”

The room went silent, except for the crying.

“Alright, give the baby to the mother. We’ll check later.”

They laid the baby next to her, wet and slimy and yowling. The baby stopped crying as soon as they put it next to its mother, it lifted up its head and looked at attentively at its mother.

At first, she thought she was imagining it. Newborns couldn’t possibly have a gaze like this, but the baby was looking directly at her, with thoughtful, stubborn eyes. She couldn’t think of anything else, so she kissed it on the head. The baby looked away and put its cheek on her chest.

She never forgot this moment, but she never shared it with anyone, buried it in her heart.

* * *

I remember my own birth. I remember what was before that too. I was standing next to a bottomless pit. There was a man, wearing something black, like a priest’s robe, and holding a ~~lamp~~ lantern.

“Jump in,” said the man, “jump in, jump in.”

So, I jumped in and ended up there. I couldn't see anything. I could feel that I existed. Some liquid poured into me and divided me in two. My ~~one~~ One of my parts wrapped around me, and the other one, the real me, stayed underneath it. I grabbed something. I was ~~destroying~~ digging up this something and taking its place, going deeper and deeper inside.

I was changing. Slowly but surely, there were different parts separating out of me. But I wasn't being divided, I was staying whole. The first part that appeared, later turned into my mouth, then the next parts followed.

I forgot almost everything that was before then. I only remember that man, wearing something black, telling me "jump in, jump in, jump in," and so, I jumped in.

* * *

A nurse walked out.

"Mindeli!"

Akaki got up.

"The doctor wants to see you, follow me."

Akaki wanted to ask if everything went well, but he couldn't move his lips to form the sentence. They stopped in front of a glass wall.

"We'll move them to the ward tomorrow. Wait for the doctor. He should be here soon."

Eka was sitting up in her bed, singing the baby to sleep. She smiled upon seeing Akaki and turned the baby around so that the father could see it. The newborn had its eyes closed and a frown on its face. Its hands were flailing around. Akaki knocked on the window with his forefinger, smiling at his child and its mother.

"Are you the father of Mindeli?"

Akaki turned around. The doctor was wiping his glasses. "Yes, I am."

"Please, come with me. We have to talk." "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, there were no complications. I want to talk to you about something else."

The doctor's office was arranged in an old-fashioned way. A wooden desk was covered with glass, and there was a calendar behind the glass. There was a box on the desk, full of pens with labels of different medicines. A spare white coat was hung up on the wall.

The rest is blurred in Akaki's memory. The doctor mentioned something about inherited anomaly, some syndrome, and that a person cannot be born without a biological sex, but sometimes, there's no physical indication of it; that they don't know much about this syndrome, since it's only ever been found in stillborn children.

Akaki was quiet, all curled up in his chair. With the doctor's every word, he was getting smaller and smaller. The doctor extended his hand, told him to take care.

Akaki flinched. He stood up, shook the doctor's hand; and with something like an attempt of a smile on his face, he walked out of the office.

* * *

Doctor Andro Vachnadze would forever remember this day. There wasn't supposed to be anything special, the students weren't expecting anything like this either. So, the doctor was amused when one of his students sounded hesitant, while announcing the newborn's sex. The moment he looked down at the baby, the mocking smile turned into a frown on his face. In the place of genitals, there was nothing, just smooth skin. While examining the doctor couldn't find any evidence of developed sex organs. There was a small hole in the genital area, most likely the urethral opening (or so decided the doctor based on its location).

"Looks like the Singer-Kvashali syndrome," he blurted out, startled. "Give the baby to the mother for some time now, it'll need additional examination later on."

Additional tests proved the supposed diagnosis. The doctor himself explained everything to the baby's mother and was surprised by how calm she was. As if she already knew what the doctor was telling her. The doctor wrote off her calmness to postnatal shock, thought she wasn't fully grasping what was going on. So, he immediately went to talk to the baby's father. The father took the news more adequately than the mother, but he looked so horrified while walking out of the doctor's office, that the doctor got worried about his safety on the way back.

This was the first case of a baby being born with the Singer-Kvashali syndrome. Doctor Andro Vachnadze was excited and scared at the same time. In the future, the baby would need endocrinological examination, and possibly, a consultation with a psychotherapist later on. But before all that, he had to inform the scientists who discovered this syndrome.

* * *

It was midday. Gardener Zacharia was looking after a willow bush, cutting off the yellowed leaves for the second time. He thought treated it well with disinfecting solution and was watering it less than usual, so that the extra moisture wouldn't aggravate the fungus, but nothing seemed to help the poor plant.

Now the ladybugs were making his work harder, flying aimlessly all around Zacharia. The gardener was spending most of his time on shooing them away. The work should've taken him half an hour, but because of the ladybugs, he spent a good hour and a half tending the plant. He wouldn't have noticed when Akaki walked into the garden, if it wasn't for the heavy footsteps.

Zacharia looked at him. He didn't ask anything, thought that if there was anything Akaki wanted to share with him, he would, even without asking. Akaki didn't pay him any attention, he was all pale, looking somewhere far away. He walked quickly through the garden, didn't even notice the ladybugs.

Zacharia shrugged and cut off the very last of yellow leaves of the willow bush.

Translated from the Georgian by Mariam Kadjaia

I Wish I Could Be Turned into a Nightingale...

(An Excerpt from The Story)

The author thanks Ovid for including the myth of Philomela and Procne in The Metamorphoses

“Because it’s men’s language and their grammar...”

Hélène Cixous

Aunt Zina, Middle of the XX Century:

It’s all very well you asking me why I let him in, but what was I supposed to do? He was a family man, a neighbour. It never even occurred to me! And Murtazi adored him. He would often come over to our place—they would have a few drinks, a bit of a laugh. It never even occurred to me... I was still a young woman, only just married.

He came in and everything was fine. Murtazi was out. I gave him something to eat, some gudi cheese and some bread I had in, shoti bread¹, I think it was. I had some tomatoes, so I gave him those as well. Murtazi was out pruning the grapevines. I didn’t have a clue what time he would be finished and, well...

When he pushed me down, I grabbed hold of the fire iron, but just as I was about to smash it over his head, he stopped me by gripping my arms. His glass was standing on the table, and there was still some wine in it, and I don’t know whether it was my head crashing into the table that caused it or something else, but the glass fell over and broke and all the wine spilled out. The wine was the least of my worries, but for some reason the only thing I can remember after the moment my head banged against the floor is the spilled wine. Everything else I’ve forgotten.

¹ Traditional Georgian bread baked in a tandoor-type oven.

Oh no! The very thought! How could I tell anyone? Even now I burn with shame to think of it. And even if I did say something, sweetheart, who would listen to me? Who would believe me? He was a family man, an honourable man, with a good reputation...

I was so upset I didn't know what to do, so I got up and started weaving this rug. There's nothing on it apart from flowers and crosses, but I know what went into it. And now you do, too.

You be a good girl, sweetheart, and don't go telling anyone what Auntie Zina has told you here today. Not now, while I'm still alive, and not once I'm dead either. All this time I've kept as quiet as a mother nightingale², and I'm not about to bring shame on myself in my old age. So you just do as I ask, sweetheart, there's a good girl...

The Seventh, Our Time:

We've added one more to our ranks. And it was only the other day that we women were saying how the year has only just begun, how it's only March and yet there are already eight of us. Goodness knows what's going to happen next...

I was a teacher. I taught Georgian. But then we had a child and he told me my place was at home, looking after the child, not out at work. And I believed him. A few months later he lost his job. He still wouldn't let me go out to work, and yet he couldn't find anything himself. So basically, we struggled. We really struggled. Sure, my family helped us out a bit, his did too, but we still struggled. We fought a lot. Almost constantly. He hit me. I put up with it. All of us here put up with it. To tell the truth, everyone here has the same story.

I don't know why I put up with it. I think it was because I didn't want the family to fall apart. I was scared. Now I think it would have been better to let the kid grow up without a father at all than with a father like that. No use thinking about that now, though...

Then, one day, it happened. No, he wasn't drunk—he wasn't a drinker, didn't touch a drop. Why do people think that every man who does what he did either must have been drunk or must be a psychopath? That's not the way it is. He was a regular man, quite normal, just like all the others. They're all the same. And if I hadn't sharpened the knife that day, maybe I would have survived. Yes, I'd have still been wounded, but so what? The wound would have healed over, and I would have got better. And maybe he would even have come to his senses a little bit, who knows?

You'll never guess who comes to see us. The Virgin Mary! Amazing, right? The first time she came she was glowing as brightly as the sun. We were all completely terrified!

"Don't be afraid," she said. "It's me, the Virgin Mary."

We were still scared, though. After that, she came dressed in black, like a nun, so as not to frighten us anymore. She had a big cross hanging down over her heart.

The angels go out to greet her, bowing at the waist (those ones over there, the ones who look like pillars of fire, yeah, that's them). Anyway, the first time she came, I plucked up my courage and asked for her pity. "Mother of God," I said. "Our lives are difficult to bear."

And she replied, "Therefore I will set a mark on all women, that vengeance shall be taken on their murderers sevenfold."

Then she pointed us out to the angels and said to them, "These women are not to pass through the aerial toll-houses. My Son will come and bring them to us."

And we've been waiting here ever since, the old-timers and the newcomers. Hey, wait a minute! Do you see the light? Look, over there! I think he's come. Look! I can hear singing too. Glooory be to theeeee, Chriiist, the giver of liiiiife...

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² Female nightingales do not sing; only the males.

A Girl Who was not Given a Name, Our Time:

Get off me. It hurts.

I'm sorry but I must step in here—this will be the first and the last time. You know I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't necessary, but those are the only words she knows so what else can I do? The problem is that from the outside, or more precisely from her mother's mouth, those are the only words anyone can hear. And it was only when the metal implement gripped her head that she realised what they meant. She hasn't felt anything since then, though, so let's leave her be now and turn out attentions to the doctor.

The doctor can't see what he is doing, but there are certain signs which let him know whether or not he's operating correctly. The first sign is a cracking sound—this indicates that the forceps have crushed the embryo's head. The doctor must concentrate now and make sure that on the procedure table to his right—the one just over there, you see it? The silver table made of metal, with casters, yes, that one—that laid out on the table are precisely two legs, precisely two arms, a head, and a body. This is extremely important, because if even a small part of the embryo remains in the womb, it will cause dangerous complications.

Why the need for such cruelty? Isn't there any other way? No, because the embryo is too large to be aspirated (that's not to say that the aspiration method is harmless and painless either—abortions, in general, are neither harmless nor painless!). Anyway, this is necessary cruelty—the parents already have five girls and if they want another child now, it must only be a boy, whereas this one's a girl (again!).

There now, the doctor has finished his operation. Nothing out of the ordinary, just a little bit of blood loss and some general weakness, which will soon pass.

Patient No. 5 (diagnosis: aphasia, end stage), Whenever:

I her it when and... it that and this so I that not and that way too. And her with that and me too. You? You and her who hers... and my this and its it and that way that way that way that way... Me no no no no. She still that way so that I no and her it. What and how, that way and not... not me... not anymore, not anymore, not anymore, not anymore... no, no, no, no, noooooo! (waves arms)

There, there and here and over there and everyone and we and I and you and her and all of you and they! everyone! everyone! everyone! I it her, how, where that way and not then either, when it... where you? where they? where?! where?! where?! (spreads arms wide)

Me no, no, no! No one! Never! Nothing... my, hers too, yours, all of yours, theirs, ours, ours, ours! (makes fists)

Me, no longer me, and yet no longer...no longer...no longer...no longer... (shakes head)

Patient No. 16 (diagnosis: aphasia, end stage), whenever:

A Little Lady's Dream (traditional):

I wish I could be turned into something else, I
wish I could be turned into a nightingale,
I wish I could be taught how nightingales speak,
And become one with these gardens and vales.

Translated from the Georgian by Philip Price