



The Real
Georgian Dream

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WHERE'S DALI?

In May of 2024, there took place, during the spring in Tbilisi, an extraordinarily strange occurrence. The cherry blossoms were in bloom, the magnolias were magnificent, and the sun was rising—none of which was strange.

Just after dawn, French roast filling their nostrils, the Drosashvili's were ready to start the day.

"Dali!" Paris tucked her t-shirt into her cut-off jean shorts and called for her daughter.

"I'm starving," Giorgi, the father of the house complained, before he scratched an itch on the tip of his nose.

"Me too. Where's the teenager?" asked mom. "Still sleeping?" and she walked down a short hallway. "Wake up," Paris Drosashvili called, and she lifted her knuckles to rap on beloved daughter Dali's bedroom door. "Pop-tarts," she announced, and knuckled a knock-knock that knocked the door wide open. She gasped.

Empty.

Neat sheets on an empty bed. For the first morning in her entire life, Dali did not wake up in her own bed.

Paris gasped again. "Where could she be?" she asked her husband.

"You've scared her off! Always arguing and debating and telling her what to do and how to do it," he said with the voice of a judge.

"Growing pains you fool. She's so impatient, she won't take no for an answer."

"Arf!" Their mutt barked.

"Hush, I'm trying to think," Paris said and wagged her finger faster

at the three-legged dog than the dog wagged his tail at her.

Come to think of it, he's been barking all night," said Giorgi. "And all morning."

"All night? I didn't hear a single bark you blockhead, what with your thunderous snoring," Paris said. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"Do you think he's trying to tell us something?"

"Of course he's trying to tell us something, you numbskull. He's telling us Dali's in danger," Paris said, and she gasped again and covered her mouth with both hands. "He's telling us she never came home."

"What do you mean she never came home?" Giorgi said. All of a sudden, he turned and looked at the television with big bug eyes. He dropped his cherry pop-tart on the floor and stared at the screen. "The game."

The dog tried to eat the pop-tart. He spit it out.

Paris glared at her husband, still staring at the TV. "There's no time for rugby, you dolt." She hated rugby. She loved her cut-off jean shorts.

"No, not today, dear." The championship, Georgia versus Portugal, had been a good game, a great game. A distracting game. "Georgia won. We celebrated. I ... I forgot. I forgot to pick her up at the library," he wailed. "I'm such an imbecile." He caught his reflection off the television screen and laughed and laughed until he cried.

"That game was in March, you birdbrain."

"Oh, that's right. That was March," he said, momentarily assuaged, "No wait! We watched the replay yesterday." Told you it was distracting. "We won again, and celebrating, I forgot about Dali!" he said, and wailed again.

"Dolt! Deadbeat! Highlights? What's wrong with this world?"

"Where could she be?" Giorgi squinted at his wife.

"She never called. She must have fallen and struck her head. She's probably dead. I'm checking the hospital." And Paris grabbed her matching blue jean jacket with two hands, swung her fists in a circle above her head, weaved her arms through the sleeves, and pulled the jacket strait. "Call me if you find her and if you don't find her, don't forget to call me so we can meet for lunch." Paris flung open the door, wiped her nose, and without looking, she grabbed *Dead Souls* instead of her cell phone, and ran off before Giorgi could utter a word.

"Typical," Giorgi mumbled to himself, staring at the phone, "Paris, always with her grand plan, then—boom. Unfocused, no commitment, all bluster, the plan fails, doomed before it begins." He frowned at her

phone. She stole his book! He had hoped to read his favorite novel by his favorite Ukrainian. Wait—second favorite Ukrainian.

No, better she took it. No time for such nonsense, such distraction—not with Dali to worry about.

“Dammit Dali. Where are you?” He smacked himself on the forehead with both palms three times, and screamed, “I’m not a deadbeat.”

He scratched his chin. He tapped his foot. He pulled out his hair.

Giorgi always complained Dali grew up too fast. Already sixteen, tomorrow she’d be thirty-two and with a few blinks of the eye, she’d probably be one-hundred-and-three. She should know better, as she’s very responsible: she goes to school—though she plays hookie a ton, she goes to Church—though mostly just to piss off the priest, and she sings so beautifully!—though her feet are quite small.

“How the devil will I find her?”

Giorgi turned on the news and paced his house in circles, and in short order paced right out the front door, where he walked more circles around the courtyard, followed by a few figure-eights, before returning inside where he continued his circles, until, realizing he was walking in circles, he decided to turn off the news.

But the television was already off. This puzzled Giorgi, and he squinted at the screen.

“Dali,” he said and started to cry. “Am I dreaming? No. But this is a nightmare.” He sat on the sofa, breathing heavily, drenched in sweat. Where the hell was Dali? He couldn’t focus and felt insane and knew only that he couldn’t keep walking around in circles. “What should I do?” Giorgi sniffed, and feeling as hopeless as a North Korean in a meat-grinder, he couldn’t think of what and so decided to do what he always did when he couldn’t think of what to do next: call Uncle.

“Where could Dali be?”

“How the devil should I know?” Uncle shouted into the phone. His wife approached from the kitchen and when she stood next to him, he rubbed out his cigarette, took the cheese, onion and coffee from the serving tray, and said, “Thank you.”

She smiled and kissed his head.

“What should I do Uncle?” Giorgi asked.

“The devil knows. I have no idea.”

“Can you help me look?”

“Surely she’s not this far north,” said Uncle. “Half-way up the

mountain? I don't think so. Don't bother me, just leave me alone."

"Uncle, I don't know what to do!" Giorgi's voice cracked and he began to sob, loudly. "This is all my fault. I'm such a deadbeat."

"First thing," and Uncle held up a finger Giorgi could not see through the phone, "most important thing. Do. Not. Panic."

"Too late. Paris is hysterical," he screamed, his breathing now faster than a Russian retreat.

"Of course she's hysterical. Where is she now?"

"No idea, she waved her fist and shouted, but now, she's nowhere to be found."

"Hysterical. Shame to have to solve this without Paris, but if she can't get her shit together. There's no time to spare. The longer Dali's kidnapped ... well ... let's just assume she's still alive."

"Wait, what? Of course she's still alive! Who the hell said she was kidnapped?"

"You just did, so time is not on our side. I will search from here to the border."

"Uncle, don't be absurd. Surely she's not that far north. No, no, drive down today. Bring your vegetables to market. After we unload, we can look for Dali together. Here in Tbilisi. Paris thinks she's in hospital."

"Hospital, hmmm? It's possible. Fine I'll come down. My vegetables are ripe and ready, already loaded. In the meantime, I'll ask my neighbors the Ivanskivilis—they know every vine in these hills, even beyond the border. Rather respectable family. I'll ask this afternoon, after the Rugby match. Unless we go hunting. Then I'll ask tomorrow."

"I thought there was no time to waste Uncle?"

"You want my help or not?" Uncle said.

Giorgi remained silent.

Uncle sighed. "Fine. I'll call him now," he grumbled. "See you in a few hours." Uncle hung up the phone, stood up, and struggled into his jacket as his wife held it out for him. He straightened his wool hat, and put on his mittens, then patted his chest pocket to confirm his cigarettes before picking up his phone to dial Ivan.

"Where could Dali be?"

Giorgi had no idea and Uncle had no idea and neither did Uncle's neighbor Ivan Ivanskivili, currently a naked behemoth with a hairy back, lying spread-eagle on his bed. He snoozed, grinning like a nitwit, snoring in his own stink, and dreaming of silky skin, his big belly full

of Georgian food and wine. The night before, during the final toast, his hunger to please his grandfather had also been satisfied: "Congratulations on your beautiful fiancé."

Yes, that's right, my beautiful prize, and don't you forget it Gramps. Ivan hoped never to be mocked again.

Stirred by his own snorts and farts, Ivan, mistaking lust for love and eager to satisfy whichever, rolled over, still dreaming of silky skin, and with a half-erect woody to match his half-awake, half-wit brain, Ivan groped for the other half of the mattress, then patted the bed with his palm, and although groggy, he sensed it, slowly—the absence of warmth, of touch, of breath, of silk.

No prize. His patting became frantic. Pat-pat-pat-pat-pat?

Empty.

Ivan bolted upright, wild-eyed and enraged. Just a cold, empty bed.

"Where?" He wanted to scream her name, but worried he'd wake up the entire house or possibly smell his own hellish breath, he only managed a scream-whisper. "Where could Dali be? And how the blazes did I end up in bed?" He sat there, blinking, panting, somehow exhausted, the house still. It smelled like dirt and morning. "You must've blacked out again, idiot," he muttered, and his head spun and the room swirled and he wondered if he was still drunk.

A whistle, a rustle, and Ivan looked over and saw the curtains billowing, the open window framed by dusty beams of early morning glow.

"Oh God. She must have been kidnapped! The brute stole her out this very window." Ivan, a bit peeved, paced and scowled and thought of the muscles he'd rip from the villain's bones when he found the wife-stealing jackal, until he froze when another thought jolted him:

"What if she hasn't been kidnapped? What if she ran away?" This possibility was unbearable and he began to sob, until soon, boogers bubbled from both nostrils.

"No, no, no," he said, and Ivan Ivanskivili flung the mattress across the room and searched, just in case—every corner, every shadow—but he knew it was no use, he knew his love, his teenage fiancé, was already far way. She wasn't in the bedroom or under the bed, not behind the chair or curled up in the closet, not in the chest of drawers or hiding behind the door.

Ivan gave up. His shoulders slumped and he collapsed to the floor, where he lay, unable to think. For over an hour, he shook his head at a repeating pattern on the Persian rug. Then, he stood up slowly.

“A tiny miscalculation. I thought if we married, with time ...” He looked down and patted his round belly. “Am I really so unlovable? I thought she just needed a nudge.” He walked over to gaze out and check the open window. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he said to himself, “I didn’t nudge, I pushed—a stupid push, right out the stupid window. Surely she landed and kept on running, probably all the way home to daddy. Daddy who’s certainly not going to vote for Ivan next election—oh what a dreadful miscalculation.”

“I’m bleeding votes,” Ivan shouted. He won the last election by just 84 votes.

Ivan clenched his fists and his whole body shook and his skin tingled and his love turned to hate. “She’s humiliated me.” He slammed the window shut with a splinter of wood and wiped the sweat from his eyes.

He didn’t know where the hell Dali was either.

“I never should have kidnapped her.”

His phone rang. Caller ID: Dali’s Uncle. So he threw the phone out the window.