

# An Orange Sea

The summer was coming to an end in Abkhazia. Hydrangea blossomed early in 1992. The rich light green buds invisibly transformed and became completely white. Nearby they looked like lumps of snow and reminded of the winter Leningrad. In autumn the flower heads would turn pink and three-meter bush branches would bend down to the ground under their weight. No one here knew the scientific name of them but their smell of vanilla or jasmine would be remembered. Luxurious white caps of fanciful petals on long strong stems were growing into the open window making everyone breathe in the wonderful aroma. The smell got even stronger with the morning chill coming down from the mountains and pushing out the velvet and warm sea air. A delicate grayish white two-headed Sukhumi mountain could be seen from the window of a small room on the first floor of a wooden and unplastered house. A blue lane of the stone road with multicoloured spots of slowly and silently moving cars was stretching to the mountain top turning around the foot covered with cedars. On the left, behind the various roofs, there was a narrow strip of the sky-blue sea, restricted by the skyline. The white sky was being filled by the gentle morning sun. Its rays flashed from behind the mountain and got into the untidy room. First it shone on the curved Viennese chair back and carelessly left clothes on it, then it noticed a young woman lying in bed and stopped on her face. Her sensitive eye lashes flinched.

"Lenushka, are you awake?" the blue-eyed lieutenant in a naval uniform asked, gently stroking her fair hair. The eyelashes on her careless sleepy face flinched again.

"Aha, you are awake!" the lieutenant answered to himself with a smile.

He was sitting on the side of the iron bed and touching his wife's face in the places where the sun rays had just been shining, to stop the sun tickling her. Then he would bend over and gently kiss her. He put his hand on her bump under the cover and softly stroked it.

"Pity you can't eat citrus at the moment. The locals brought two barges of tangerines to our pier. They are not fully ripe yet, but so tasty! We eat them for lunch."

"Igoryok, why are you wearing a uniform?" Lena whispered under her breath stretching herself. "What's the occasion?"

"There isn't one! Last night Georgian landing troops turned up in Gagra. Would you imagine, they've got St. Andrew's flag! They got the ships last year after the separation and haven't changed anything. Or maybe on purpose... They've got a former Political Bureau member now. He might still be thinking he is a Foreign affairs minister. And this uniform is just in case."

"What case?"

"Nothing. Don't worry. I'll come back soon and in the evening we'll go motor-boating. The captain promised, do you remember Alexey? He popped in last week," the lieutenant quickly got up, rolled the imaginary steering-wheel and sang, "An orange sky, an orange sea, tra-la-la, tra-la-a..."

Igor left without having breakfast and Lena stayed in bed thinking about their evening boat ride.

Elena and Igor got married a year ago. Straight after he got a dirk and the stars of the medical lieutenant, he was sent to Georgia for testing a new medical preparation in the field environment. For the time being he was en-

rolled in the Russian border unit which was still defending the sea border of the former USSR. Lena went with her husband.

They stayed in a room of a two-storey private house. A straight road led from the house to the sea, it had been planted with slender rows of date palms, Chinese palm trees and gentle oleanders and was called Leon avenue. Recently it had been named Lenin Avenue. Two kilometres from the house there was a military pier with a lot of Russian boats, barges and tug-boats. That was where Igor had been going every morning for two months.

Lena had to buy something for the dinner so she went to Sukhumi's central market. She had to wait for a bus for a long time but it didn't come, so she decided to walk to Mir Avenue and then she turned left and walked another thirty minutes to Karl Marx Street. After walking past two or three quarters of the buildings she saw a nervous man running towards her. He said the public transport was not working and there had been a bomb explosion at the market, there had been victims and casualties. While they were talking, something had changed around them. Kindergarten children ran past them followed by frightened women with bags and sacks.

Lena stopped. She decided not to go to the market but to turn back, to the house. The way back was long and weary. She had to walk around the new anti-tank barriers. She could see militiamen with guns. Near her house in the Lenin Park, she could see armed people.

That day armed troops of the Georgian army entered Sukhumi but were stopped at the Red Bridge by the Abkhazian militiamen. That was near the piers of the sea port. Georgian helicopters appeared in the sky and a moment later went away after firing a military sanatorium and the building of the Supreme Soviet. Radio, television and telephone didn't work. There was no light. Dreadful rumours were spreading all over the town – Georgians

let all the criminals out of the prison and they were robbing, raping and murdering in town.

An eighty-year-old heavy man, the owner of the house where the young family stayed, tried to calm Elena down, promised to help her go to Sochi. It was no good looking for Igor. The old man advised not to go to the trade port where the holidaymakers were getting ready for evacuation, there could be a real babel there. Being heavily pregnant, she couldn't go there. It was not far to go to the navel base where her husband was serving, but all the Russian boats had left for Gagra in the morning.

All that reasoning was interrupted by the shouts outside the house and the shriek of the shot dog. People with guns broke into the house. They knocked down the old man and tied down two young women – the man's niece and Elena.

A pacey short man in a tacky jacket and black jeans with round shifty eyes – he must have been the youngest – had already finished with the old man's niece and now started ripping the clothes off Elena. She was lying on the floor and trying to resist. No one could help the young pervert. Everyone was busy. They were emptying the drawers, quickly throwing the contents into a big white sheet spread on the floor. The ironed underwear and clothes, crockery and everything turned up by chance was thrown there.

"Sir!" the young guy was annoyed, "What shall we do with this bitch?" He turned to his boss with shoulder loops of senior lieutenant of Georgian guard and spoke Russian so that she could hear. "Look at her belly! What shall I do? Shoot her?"

The boss was running the show downstairs. He carefully examined the tied sacks that his people were throwing from upstairs and from time to time he would glance angrily at the old man sitting on the chair in the corner of the room.

"Don't bother, bring them all here and go and find someone else. I've got to teach you everything, puppy!"

The small "guard" pulled the women downstairs by their hair. He threw them in the corner where there were fresh seedlings of vine and kicked both of them with his boot. He spat vexedly, he was disappointed he hadn't got a chance to have enough fun between the fire-fights. Then he suddenly stood up over the women and relieved himself laughing.

At the same time the other men took the old man into the yard and started asking him about the Abkhazians' weapons. They demanded three million from him, then one million, half an hour later - three million again. They beat him up and shot in the air. The old man fell unconscious. They took him inside, pulled him into the same room on the ground floor where his niece and Lena were lying on the floor. The Georgians found an iron, undressed the old man and started torturing him. They had been bullying him until the morning came and were pathologically enjoying it. They still didn't get the desired money.

In the morning another group came, they were criminals. They also beat the old man up and demanded a million. When they saw the alive women, they were very surprised. They turned them faces up. The tortured eyes covered in dirt and blood were looking at them. Bruises and ripped dresses with a strong smell of urine cooled down the wishes of the drunk rapists. They dragged the owner of the house outside, put handcuffs on him, hung him on the thick tree branch and beat him up, this time without asking for anything. Then they stopped, slaughtered the chickens and shot morphine.

While they were torturing the old man outside, Lena, lying on her front, managed to untie her hands and the other woman's. They got upstairs together. Through the window of her room Lena climbed down, practically

jumped on the ground, into the white buds of hydrangea bushes. The old man's niece followed her. They decided to find their way to the military pier.

The town had changed a lot in the last twenty four hours. All day it had been fired from the Georgian helicopters. Everywhere houses' ruins were burning, along the prospects burning trees looked like bright torches. Near the park there was a truck with a canvas cover. It was full of corpses, which looked like beef carcasses delivered to a shop. They covered the carriage of the truck mixed with clothes, sandals, hats, socks and dresses.

Slowly, with a big effort making their way between the ruined houses, the women peeped into one of the yards and a second later ran out of there. They saw a big hole in the ground. Out of there women were crying and shouting, dug in the hole up to their shoulders. They were holding children in their raised arms. Around them there walked armed people, shouting something all the time. It was difficult to understand whether they were Abkhazians or Georgians... They could have been someone else who came to help Abkhazians and torture local Georgian people. It was a mutual slaughter.

The two women were making their way along the road in the end of which there was a small wine shop. Its Georgian owner used to always open it for all comers. Now all the windows in his house were smashed, broken bottles were lying around and among the scattered toys – trains, rubber rockets, multicoloured cars – his wife's body was lying in a big puddle of blood. The shop door was facing Rustaveli Embankment and the old Georgian man was nailed to the door.

They had another hundred steps to the pier. They could see no Russian boats. There was a small boat, spinning and pulling tow-ropes of the only barge near the pier. The first barge, full of refugees, had already sailed away five minutes before. It was being slowly dragged by

a tracker. On the pier there gathered about forty women, children and old people. The second barge could be their only rescue. The hospital ship "Yenisei", guided from Sebastopol to evacuate refugees, had just appeared and was approaching the harbour. However, a few Georgian motor-boats were already darting in and out between the ship and the coast. Two tanks were coming to the pier along the prospect and rollicking "guards" of the Georgian army were wandering towards the harbour...

Trying to save themselves, people were jumping into the barge hold. On the tangerines. Like on a soft mattress. Lena looked around – her fellow traveller had disappeared. She could already be on the barge or she could have changed her mind and returned home, to the old man.

Lena climbed aboard across two narrow boards and tried to climb down the hold but lost balance and fell on the other people. They picked up the pregnant woman carefully and carried her into a safe place. The refugees on the ship were looking at each other with anxiety and joy at the same time. Now, very soon they would be taken out of that hell...

Here, in the hold of the old rusty barge, it smelt of tangerines and nothing reminded the people of the war apart from the bullet shells in the hands of the children who were showing off their trophies in front of each other.

As soon as the tug-boat pulled the barge away from the pier, a military helicopter flew past and the firing of the town resumed again. The tanks turned towards the trading port, where the "Yenisei" was accosting, a military motor-boat was approaching the barges and a small cannon turned up on the shore. Georgians were turning it towards the sea to shoot at the barges. The first one, being at a longer distance from the pier, was a good target. The second barge was just leaving the harbour. Its tug-boat turned the horn on and its irregular loud tone sounded like a helpless wounded creature, it blacked out helicop-

ters' roar, tanks' caterpillar tracks rumble and impudent shouts of raging "guards" staying on the pier of the Russian military base.

Being unable to do or understand anything, Lena was lying motionlessly among someone's sacks and looking indifferently at the sky. A small colourless crab was clumsily crawling out of a crack in the rusty metal into the sun. Lena had gone through a lot of pain and had done everything she could. Her hearing seemed to have switched off. Now all her thoughts were of one thing. The baby. She was wishing the barge to go as far as possible.

The cannon shell sank the first barge straight away and tens of people went to the bottom of Sukhumi harbour. The tangerines were rhythmically rocking on the sea surface. Thousands of red, orange and green balls looked like multicoloured serpentine after a cheerful New Year night.

The second barge left the harbour and was waiting for its fate.

The motor boat approaching the pier took the position between the coast and the barge and slowed down.

"What are you doing, jerk?" the officer was shouting into his megaphone, waving his hand with a gun and shooting into the air. "Do you want war with Russia, scum bag? Come on, shoot me! Make sure you don't miss!" the officer was pointing at the tricoloured flag raised on purpose, to differ from the Georgian boats with St. Andrew's flags.

Lena recognized her husband's voice but she couldn't move to let him know she was there. The tug-boat was slowly pulling the barge leading it further and further away from the terror of the last 24 hours, from the coast of Sukhumi harbour with a Georgian cannon on the pier and from the boat with Igor.

Two sailors from the Russian motor-boat threw lifelines into the sea. After the first barge sank, every here



and there were people appearing on the surface full of tangerines. They managed to distinguish the life-rings in the orange mush, grab them and paddle clumsily to the shore. The wail of the second tug-boat horn and dreadful screams of the people in the hold of the barge were blacking out the officer's shout. Igor continued swinging his gun and shooting but in his head he could hear the words of a children's song he had heard on the radio in his childhood, "An orange sky, an orange sea..."

It was just five cables to the shore. Suddenly there was a thunderous explosion.

The captain of the motor boat launched his only torpedo into the pier without any calculations. The Georgian cannon and half of the tie-up stands broke into pieces. However, the boat was able to moor at the broken pier. Not waiting for the tie-down, both officers jumped onto shore and ran along Leon Avenue, to the houses where their families lived.

Igor was out of breath when he ran up to the familiar house. There was no one in their room. There was broken furniture, scattered clothes, smashed tableware everywhere in the house and broken hydrangea bushes outside the window. Coming downstairs, he was terrified to see the niece of the old man try to take his body off the tree.

"Where is Lena?" Igor asked quietly. He lifted the old man and took him off the tree branch. Half a minute passed but he didn't dare look at the woman, he was scared to learn the truth from her eye. She covered the old man with a blanket, glanced at Igor, looked dully somewhere and said, "On the barge with tangerines."

Igor understood everything. If she had been in the first barge, she was dead, if she was in the second one, she was on her way to Sochi.

In the morning Gagra was captured by Georgians. Their troops accomplished their goal - Abkhasia was cut off Russia. Now all Russian boats near Gagra had to go

into the open sea and were going to defend the hospital ship with refugees from Sukhumi. They were waiting for orders. The captain of the torpedo boat Alexey understood his old vessel was useless. They had twice less sailors, just two officers – he and a medical officer – and one air torpedo. So, breaking all orders, he was keen to go to Sukhumi to save his family and trying to persuade himself, repeated the same thing to himself, “One hour – there, one hour – back. The radio isn’t working. No one will know anything.”

On the broken pier, where Igor returned, there were five people from the first barge. They were pulled out by the sailors. The lieutenant didn’t ask them anything. He was scared to learn the worst. What if someone had seen his Lena. He could only wait for a miracle to happen. They had to lead the armless boat through the Georgian military vessels and make for the open sea. After that, on the way to Sochi, they could catch up with the second barge.

More than half an hour had passed but the captain was still not there. Igor was walking nervously on the deck looking in the direction of Leon Avenue. A minute later he saw Alexey appear in the middle of the road, make a couple of steps, freeze, swing his arms and crash. He couldn’t hear shots but a second later armed people in the uniform of Georgian “guards” filled the road.

“Cast off!” unexpectedly for himself, Igor raised his voice to a shout. He forgot many things they had to do and check before that order. He never remembered them.

The boat with white digits on the side “067”, obeying the only remaining officer, quickly pulled off from the shore.