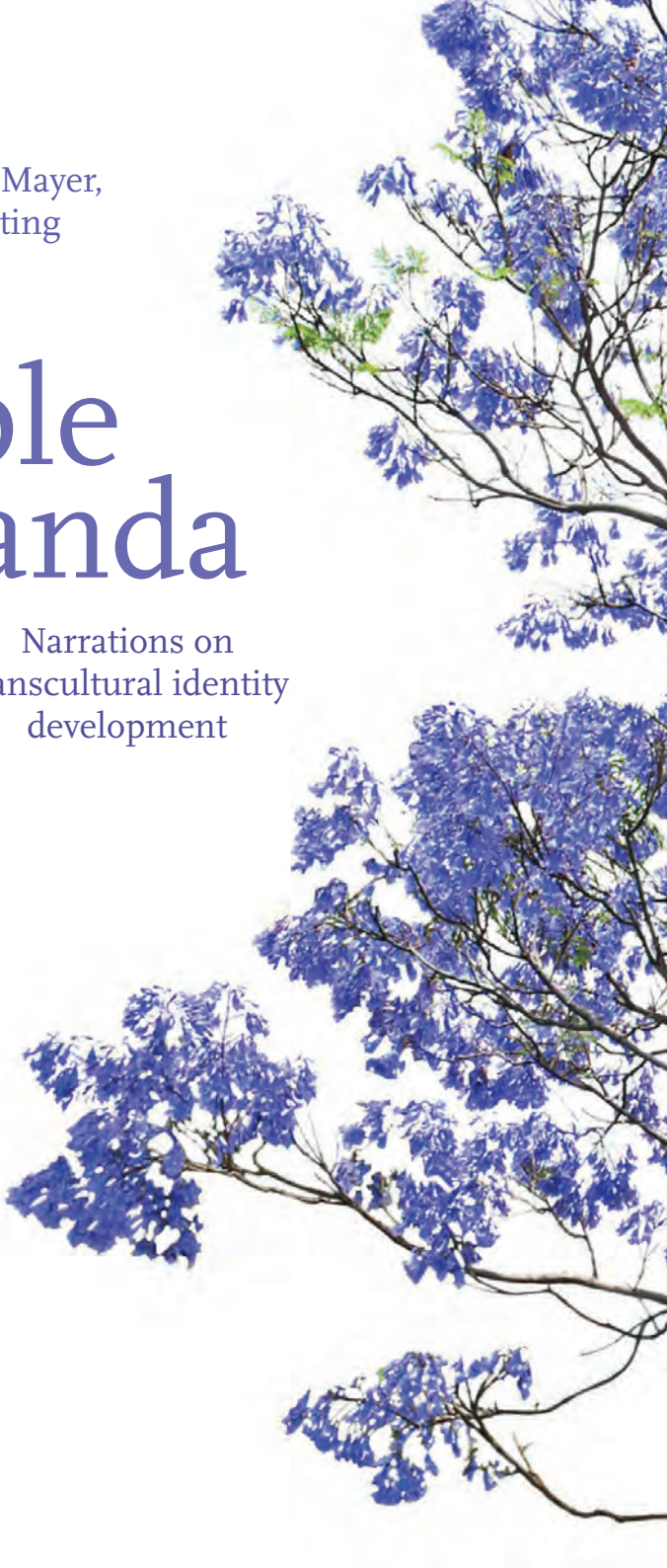
Claude-Hélène Mayer,
Stephan Wolting
(ed.)

Purple Jacaranda

Narrations on transcultural identity development



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Introduction

Claude-Hélène Mayer

Purple Jacaranda – food for thought on a city stroll[1]

In October the jacarandas blossom in all their glory. The landscape turns into a sea of purple, draped in the striking colour of the magnificent treetops, while the dusty ground is covered in a carpet of velvety lilac. The jacarandas line the avenues that carve their way through the urban districts of this South African metropolis. As I saunter through the suburb, which has a deserted feel to it in the noontime heat, the scent of spring is in the air, imbuing the entire city with a whiff of its fragrance. The purple blossoms shoot up, undeterred by the grey dust left behind by the last winter as they swirl upwards.

The jacaranda tree has its own unique history – a successful migration story that has accorded an entire city a new identity. I recall reading about these trees, having been imported from Argentina initially to grow in Pretoria's private gardens. I wonder how it must feel to be transplanted like that into the aridity of the South African Highveld winters and its summers marked by rains and storms. I wonder if the wind on the bark has a different feel to it here.

A long walk finally has me reach a hill close to the city. Looking down at the canopy of purple blossoms, I realise that all of this is thanks to an innovative urban planner of the 19th century who, in great style, later imported the jacarandas from Australia on a grand scale. Today the trees are integral to the city, deep-rooted, not only in the soil of the city, but also in the identity of the people of Pretoria. I smile to myself at the thought that for many years we have been privy to a multicultural cultivation here which has turned into the image of the city. I personally think it is an excellent premise for life in the capital city of the new South Africa! If only more such transplants could come to fruition so successfully and in such an identity-establishing manner.

On my way back I take a rest on a bench beneath my favourite tree. I look up at the full burst of colour of the treetop. As I sit there, I ponder on what would have shaped the identity of such a tree. How has the environment influenced it and, in tune with the other trees, turned it into an emblem of

1 Translated from the original German manuscript "Purple Jacaranda" by Birgitt Lederer.

the city? And how do the people of this city perceive the beauty and multiculturalism of this natural wonder if they themselves do not hail from abroad?

These are questions that I still grapple with as I stare across the grove of trees below my apartment and feel a deep solidarity with and closeness to these purple watchmen of the street. I cannot help wondering: How do other people develop their identity in the context of new encounters and their environment?

Stephan Wolting & Claude-Hélène Mayer

"There's something I wanna tell you …"

All memories are profane
and all memories are holy,
but that's all we have,
we haven't anything more.
– Ferdinand von Schirach, What remains …

On 10 October 2014 the Nobel Prize was awarded to the Indian child advocate Kailash Satyarthi and to Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani girl who was shot in the forehead by the Taliban because she had insisted on going to school. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel called her the "Identity of Pakistan".

This could be considered as a concession to the significance of an intercultural or transcultural background. In spite of the recent cautious approach, the strongly Hindu-inclined India and the Muslim Pakistan – two nuclear powers – are still age-old enemies; however, in our context it seems more crucial that, along with her story, Malala travelled all around the world, showing how autobiographical stories can influence the world – maybe even how they can change the world.

Many people were deeply moved by her fate and by the willingness to tell her story, so much so that they were listening, captivated by the description of her life. What has happened in this widespread political context can be applied in a narrative-structural way to the microcosmos of the lives of many other people.

Telling stories, listening to autobiographical stories and sharing stories have particular importance in society. "Life stories" have the gift of complementing one another, they can be interlinked and, at best, they can inspire other stories or generate new narrations. A quotation from the Swiss writer Peter Bichsel, when he spoke at the end of a series of lectures in Frankfurt ("Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen"), further emphasises this position:

> Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, I thank you very much. In the beginning I was very afraid of you, but you were lovely and I was getting close to you, because I recognized that you do like listening to my stories. You did something we all should do more often: to allow to

> me my stories. The world would look much better if we would allow to somebody his stories, allow to our friend and to our girlfriend, to our wife and to our husband, to our children – and to our sick neighbours, too.[1]

People are authors and people's biographies are what makes them. There is a very close connection between the creation of a lifestyle and a literary work. The term *author* or *female author* has always been tied very closely to the biographical identity, according to the German writer Martin Walser, who wrote the following sentence in his diary: "The human being is a writer (better said: a storyteller), and if he isn't still a writer, he isn't a human being any longer."[2]

We would like to inspire you with this work and to give you the opportunity to identify somewhat with it and, in the best case scenario, for you as the reader to write down your own story too. Stories have the power to help us to live and to keep alive our memories in our special way.

The researchers of American Creative Writing Studies, notably among them Alexander Steele[3], have pointed out the close connection between autobiographical and creative writing, without focusing too much on the influence of the sentence or a definition of aesthetic taste. Teachers of writing, such as Gary Snyder, have given their students an idea of the creativity, inventiveness and high level of aesthetics with which students or participants of their workshops are able to develop and write stories about their own lives under professional guidance.[4] In this way the perception of the other, the empathy, the role distance, the tolerance of ambiguity and eventually the way in which metacommunication takes place could be trained and taught.

Theoretical reflections referring to the "construction of otherness", specifically "one's own growth" are the force behind the project: the theories and conceptions about the discourse of brain, commemoration and memory, the psychology of development, the narratology as well as conceptions (concepts, scripts and patterns) concerning the trans- and intercultural development of young people. We understand the discourse of memory and what the brain does as put forward by Daniel L. Schacter: "We ARE Memory, our identity

1 This is a reference to a poem by Matthias Claudius, "Der Mond ist aufgegangen" (The moon has risen), LE 97, P. Bichsel: Der Leser. Das Erzählen. Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen. Frankfurt 1997: Suhrkamp, p. 97.

2 Cf. M. Walser: Schreiben und Leben (Die Tagebücher 1979-1981). Reinbek bei Hamburg 2014: Rowohlt.

3 Cf. Gothams Writers' workshop: Writing Fiction: The Practical Guide from New York's Acclaimed Creative Writing School Paperback. New York 2003: Bloomsbury.

4 Cf. G. Snyder: The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations. New York 2000: Counterpoint New edition.

is memory."[5] In addition, Jean Piaget reflected on the idea that the psychology of development draws attention to the diverse and heterogeneous development of an individual on the one hand, and to the medium of memory and how memories can adulterate memories, on the other, as he illustrated with a short story:

> One of my oldest memories would – if it would have been true – have taken place in my second life year. I see the following scene vividly happening exactly in front of me. I was sitting in a pram, which was pushed by my nanny to the Champs-Elysées, when a guy came and wanted to kidnap me. The leather strap held me back, but the nanny tried to resist the man and to defend me (therefore she got some minor scratches in her face which I remember and "see" until today). A crowd of people was gathering immediately and a policeman with a small pelerine and a white stick came up, whereupon the guy fled in panic. I can see, until today, the whole scene, how it took place close to the metro-station.
>
> But when I was fifteen, my parents got a letter from that nanny, in which she informed us about her accession to the Salvation Army Counters; she was expressing her wish to confess her former mistakes, especially to give back the watch, which she had got for this – including her self-made scratches – completely invented story. As a child I was supposed to listen to this story, in which my parents believed. In a way of visual memory I did project it into the past. So the story is a memory of a memory, however a wrong one. Many "real" authentic memories are of this kind.[6]

This quotation already suggests that there is essentially no difference between the "work of remembering" and the shaped and fictionalised memory, which is shown in the work "99 ways to tell a story" by Raymond Queneau, a collection of 99 retellings of the same story.[7] The narration or the presentation of something that has happened is always structured and literalised.[8]

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5 D. L. Schacter: Searching for Memory. The Brain, the Mind and the Past. New York 1997: Basic Books; Reprint edition, quoted from Introduction Memory's Fragile Power, p. 1-11.

6 J. Piaget: Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood. New York City 1962: Norton & Company, p. 187f.

7 Cf. R. Queneau: Exercises de style. Paris 1947: Gallimard, first published in English in 1958, English version: Exercises of style. New York 2013: New Direction Books.

8 Cf. S. Wolting: Fiktion und Fremde in Hanns Josef Ortheils Romanen *Die Erfindung des Lebens* und *Die Moselreise*. In: C. Gansel, Carsten/M. Joch, Markus/M. Wolting: Göttingen 2015: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Accordingly, we have tried to inspire the authors to tell a story based on their memory which is itself still fiction. This was to be connected to the focus on the development of an intercultural identity, as set out, for instance, by Davis S. Hoopes,[9] indicating that there is a development of identity/personality from ethnocentrism to an ethnorelative multicultural personality.[10]

There is an essential contradiction to this purpose, which could hopefully lead, in the best case scenario, to a constructive and productive way of dealing with the memories in these stories. The contradiction is that on the one hand literature aims at an individual approach to memory; however, cultural studies or research about intercultural communication tends to be geared towards collective or ethnic participation. Referring to a quotation by Goethe that the specific nature leads to the general nature, and vice versa, the general to the specific, we hope that it still works in this volume.

The final focus is shifted in the sense of a narratology of the world according to fields of research and living. In his latest work, the social-psychologist Harald Welzer points out the significance of new stories or the retelling of stories, to get new ideas of cultural and newly constructed mentalities and to escape from the old patterns, frames and scripts.[11] In doing so, we can believe we are going to change the conditions and the situation of the world. Welzer was the founder of a new foundation called *Future 2*, where people try to tell small stories from alternative points of view to the world. According to Welzer, this is how we can survive and save the world. It begins with the individual story, and so everybody should try to tell his or her story.

We hope to present you with an entertaining and educating mix of different stories/narrations of intercultural encounters, developments and special situations.

Berlin, Pretoria, Oktober 2015

9 Cf. D.S. Hoopes: Intercultural communication concepts and the psychology of intercultural experience. In: M.D. Pusch (ed.: Multi-cultural Education. Chicago 1979: IL: Intercultural Press, pp. 9-38.

10 Cf. C.H. Mayer: Mori-Joe – exploring magical paths. Münster, New York 2016: Waxmann.

11 Cf. H. Welzer: Selbst denken. Eine Anleitung zum Widerstand. Frankfurt 2013 (6. Ed.): Fischer.

Reflections on transcultural identity development

David Castleton

Georgia

The Black Sea did not look like a real sea – there were no waves, no foam. The water's composure had something eerie about it. Beside this placid lagoon the bus sped, past minarets and mountains, around the coast's arc and towards the border.

They reached the frontier, where the traffic edged forward slowly. The coach eventually pulled up at the border gate, but after a discussion between the driver and the guards, instead of being allowed to pass, it was directed back and to one side. The engine spluttered into silence and the driver walked away, leaving the doors open. The passengers talked in Georgian as cold seeped through the vehicle. Some huddled resignedly under blankets; others strode outside, but neither method banished the chill.

The engine stayed quiet as the minutes passed. Among the Georgians was one foreign couple. The woman could speak Russian, but – afraid it might provoke hostility – she didn't try to find out about the hold-up. So the couple had to remain in a cold unknowing limbo.

The couple got off the coach and paced outside, never straying out of sight of the bus. They bought tea from one of the flimsy stalls huddled around the border and drank it on a brick promenade overlooking a small shingle beach. Passengers cast empty cups and expired cigarette butts onto the polluted pebbles. As the sun sank without protest into the passive sea, lights flickered on. At one end of the beach a mosque was floodlit; at the other a huge cross burned in red neon. Although the border bisected the beach, the line was unmarked. Perhaps it was determined by forces emanating from those opposing structures, pushing forward then retreating as they contested that strip of rubbish-strewn shore.

The couple returned to the coach, where their blankets failed to keep the cold out. There was no sign of when the vehicle might move. The Turkish driver came back, and the Georgians tried to convince him to close the door. As neither spoke a common language, the Georgians resorted to mimes, their arms waving the door into the longed-for sealed position. But when the driver understood, he merely shrugged and the door stayed open.

One-and-a-half hours had passed. A Russian family began flinging hands and shouting in their language. They took their bags from the hold and trooped haughtily into the night, to a destination the couple could only guess at.

After two hours, the couple tried communicating with two women sitting behind them. They didn't mind speaking Russian and explained that the

Turkish guards wouldn't let them leave because the driver's papers were only valid for 2006. As they were now a few days into 2007, the correct documents had to be faxed from Istanbul.

"How long will it take?" the couple asked.

The women shrugged, said they didn't know.

More time went by. It was getting colder. The couple's feet felt like rectangles of ice; the woman was shivering and started to feel ill. They were also out of food.

"Where are you going?" some Georgians asked, as people from different seats leant in, speaking and gesturing at the same time.

"Batumi."

"If you're only going to Batumi –" again several people spurted out the answer "– you should take your bags, walk across the border and get a taxi. It will cost about ten dollars."

The couple debated this in English. The woman was keen, the man less so.

"What if we cross the border and there are no taxis? The bus could leave and we might be stranded. And I'm sure when this delay's sorted out it won't take the bus *that* long to get across."

They decided to wait with the coach.

More time passed, then all the travellers outside rushed back to the vehicle. The papers had arrived and the bus was now permitted to shudder on, alongside massive trucks, stuttering competitively towards the border gate. After thirty minutes of this laborious creeping, the bus came to the frontier and the passengers got out. They queued in a stark building, white-walled and cold. The Turkish guards leafed through their passports – slowly, as if reading a book – until the stamp's authoritative echo allowed the line to inch forward.

Everyone back on the bus, the vehicle edged towards the Georgian section of the border, next to the vehicles it had been striving against to get out of Turkey – lurching beside them in an absurd juddering race. The passengers got off once more to have their passports checked, but on this side there was no building – they just queued before an iron fence and gate. As the guards only admitted three people at a time, the shivering line moved slowly. The chosen individuals went to a metal booth, where one official searched their documents before granting a stamp. The foreign couple waited. The guards on the gate often allowed time to elapse before letting the next three people through – chatting and joking as their boots trod in the cold. The couple were eventually admitted. The man handed over his passport.

"Hmmm … nice passport!" the guard said in English, with elevated eyebrows.

A British passport must have been a novelty because the guard called his colleagues to join in an examination of the document. The various stamps prompted comments, and the microchip – a recent innovation – generated more discussion, points of fingers, nods of heads. The queue stretched wearily behind the iron wall. The guard gave the passport back.

"Thank you, darling!" he said with a grin.

The man assumed this was just a mistake in English.

His girlfriend's German document caused less debate. The pages were skimmed before the guard directed the couple towards another metal fence. After the couple had passed through its gate, the travellers dispersed – disappearing into the border's confusion. The bus had also vanished. With rising concern, the couple scoured the area, looking for the coach or its passengers. They searched the ramshackle tea stalls as packs of dogs ran around playfully. The strays were attracted to the heaps of rubbish bags behind the stalls – happily scaling those fragrant mountains. One bitch stood balanced on the corners of a plastic bin, her huge teats hanging down.

The couple passed a small building – non-descript and lacking any sign – and spotted some women from the bus inside. The couple entered, and the women made space on the wooden benches. The interior reminded the man of a scene from a Russian novel. The room was a shell, its grey plaster walls not even splashed with paint, its only ornament a clock, which had leapt two hours ahead of the time on the border's other side. Exhausted by its jump, it struggled ponderously through the minutes. The bars of a fire fought the cold. The women's faces hung; tired lips drooped; they seemed resigned, yet annoyed. Some slumped against the wall, others leaned on one another. Noticing the Englishman shivering, seeing how the cold had blanched his face, they offered him coffee. It was made in an out-of-date device, somewhere between a kettle and a water heater. Full of grainy powder, it was the strongest, thickest and most wonderful coffee he'd ever tasted.

There was an outbreak of noise among the women; they jabbed their fingers towards the foreigners. One fetched a document and explained in Russian that it was a form all travellers had to fill in. The form was in Georgian – its alphabet a code of hoops, arcs and squiggles.

"Is it available in any other language?" the German asked.

"No."

The women translated the ciphers into Russian, and the couple wrote their responses in that language – the Cyrillic letters boxlike and imposing compared to the looping Georgian symbols.

The forms were finished, and the boredom of waiting and expectancy settled on the room. There was a strange resigned solidarity; the women gave the foreigners exhausted smiles. The couple asked how long the wait would be. Lifted shoulders and blank expressions were the only answers.

"Could we still take our bags and get the taxi?" the German asked.

"No," the Georgians replied, "it's too late now."

Another slow hour passed, mainly in silence – the clock still seemed lethargic after its forward bound. Then everybody stood up and rushed out of the building. The couple followed, and saw all the other passengers streaming towards one point from hidden areas of the border.

The coach stood behind glass walls, held like an exhibit in a museum case. Guards loitered nonchalantly around it as passengers crowded on the partition's other side. The guards opened the hold, took out the baggage and piled it into a hillock on the floor. The guards then searched the coach – combing between the seats, dismantling some with screwdrivers, probing the engine and removing sections of the hold. After this, a door in the glass was opened and a single passenger let in. A guard unhurriedly read his form. He then walked the traveller to the mound of bags, and made him extract his luggage and carry it to a table. The guard unzipped the bag, and searched through it, examining everything, down to the last pair of socks. Only then was the passenger allowed to zip up his bag, return it to the hold and board the bus. This process continued – the passengers being selected one by one as the others shivered outside. Some got impatient and tried to barge through the door. The guards roughly shoved them back.

The women from the benches watched, their faces screwed up with disgust. The eyes of one met those of the couple. She spat something in Russian.

"No good, huh? We live like pigs here – like pigs!"

The German woman didn't know how to answer. Both agreement and disagreement could cause offence. Instead she said, "They're being really strict. What are they looking for – drugs, bootleg tobacco, alcohol, guns?"

It turned out the guards were searching for consumer goods – shampoo, sanitary towels, electrical items. These products were heavily taxed in Georgia so people made a little money smuggling them from Turkey to sell on the black market. All the couple's new friends had illicit articles in their luggage for which – after the flinging of hands, the jabbing of fingers, the clashing of sharp shouts – the guards forced them to pay duties and fines. The couple were the last to be allowed through. As soon as the guards saw they were foreigners, they told them to put their bags in the hold without bothering to search them.

The bus was now permitted to shudder towards the final barrier. When it reached the fence, the guards decided on a last passport inspection. They boarded the bus rather than having the passengers disembark, but strolled down the aisle and checked the documents with methodical slowness.

Then the coach was free to roar into the Georgian night. Just past the border, a fleet of taxis – ancient Ladas and the occasional battered Mercedes – waited. There weren't many lights, but a full moon was reflected in the meek sea. A city appeared around the curve of the coast, which the couple assumed was Batumi. Batumi – that former Black Sea Monte Carlo, the resort of Tsarist aristocrats and Soviet functionaries. Elegant Batumi, home of artists and inspirer of poets.

The couple descended from the vehicle in the dark early morning – in addition to the leap of the clock, the border crossing had taken eight hours. They hailed a cab – an aged Lada, with a crack streaking like lightening down its windshield. Away from the main street, craters and potholes scarred the roads. Sometimes rocks or chunks of debris appeared, the driver – his seat-belt hanging unused – erratically swerved round them. As the taxi bounced along on its geriatric suspension, its lights revealed crumbling apartment blocks and dilapidated houses, which only seemed to remain standing out of stubbornness. Groups of men huddled around fires lit from rubbish.

Their guidebook had recommended the hotel, claiming it was one of the city's best budget options – saying it even boasted a 'western-style' toilet. In the doorway, a group warming themselves over a fire granted the visitors polite nods. They entered a room – duskily lit, with peeling paint, a scuffed floor. The receptionist, who seemed surrounded by friends and in the middle of an informal party, welcomed them with a wide grin. The woman spoke to him in Russian; the man handed him his passport.

"England! Democracy! I love you!" he yelled in English. He leapt from his desk, rushed towards the British man and hurled his arms around him.

"England very good, America OK, Russia very bad," he added before letting go.

"Do you want a drink?" he asked, switching back to Russian. "I can open the bar, fantastic Georgian wine. Some of the best wine in the world!"

The man wouldn't have minded, but his girlfriend was too tired and suspected the receptionist was eager to get drunk. The man noticed that all the friends at the receptionist's little party were female. Seven or eight women – heavily made-up though muffled in thick jerseys against the chill – sat on benches, their hands cupping glasses of wine. They smiled at the foreigners, who were too exhausted to wonder exactly why they might be there. The couple took the key, and walked wearily to their room.

The room seemed grubby, and the electric heaters did little to warm it. The walls sported patches of black mould; the bed sheets were spotted with stains. The water in the bathroom was cold, and the celebrated toilet didn't flush. There was, however, a TV and the couple watched part of a Russian film before falling asleep in their clothes.

Running and laughter in the corridor woke them. Soon, from the room above, came the noise of squeaking bedsprings, rhythmic thuds on the floor. They realised the hotel had a second function. As the night went on, they were frequently woken by such sounds.

After one particularly long session of pounding, the man couldn't get back to sleep and spent some time looking out of the window. The street was quieter now, but occasional Lada taxis drove by. The buildings teetered in stupefied exhaustion. The man wondered if it was perhaps only the support they received from one another that prevented collapse. On the pavement, people still clustered around burning rubbish.

The man finally managed to get some sleep and the incidents of pounding and squeaking occurred less often. In the late morning, after cold showers, the couple took a Lada taxi into the city centre. It had the same lightning crack down the windshield as the taxi of the previous night – something the man was beginning to think was obligatory for all taxis in Georgia. They bounced along, dodging potholes and rocks, passing mosques and churches. The latter buildings made the driver cross himself – his hands sketching a crucifix twice in front of his head and torso in one elaborate continuous gesture. As they journeyed past several churches, the driver spent much of it engaged in these actions while still able to deftly manoeuvre around the obstructions in the road.

Batumi's city centre looked scruffy and shattered. The main square was all cracked pavements, churned up cobbles, dilapidated buildings. The couple took some money from a cash point and were surprised to be asked whether they wanted American dollars or Georgian Laris. They decided, cautiously, to take both – slipping the bluey-grey flimsy-feeling Georgian notes and the newly minted greenbacks, flexible and shiny in their confidence, into their wallets. They strode around – wobbling over the uneven pavements, dodging the potholes and fissures. The locals were muffled in hats and big coats. They seemed animated yet unhurried, proud yet sociable, at a loose end, but cheerful and not bored. They talked in groups – embracing, slapping backs, kissing cheeks, pumping hands. Most had dark hair and olive skin. The women were petite, the men sturdy. They had big, rather rectangular faces with large eyes, and straight noses that could have been chiselled out of stone. The cou-

ple bought some provisions. The prices were similar to those in Hungary or Poland, though the standard of living was much lower and – the man assumed – the salaries a lot less. It didn't seem a haggling culture – each item had its price marked upon it. They saw why their friends from the border had been tempted into smuggling.

The couple wandered around. There wasn't much to see: shattered streets, with their lines of sagging buildings – motely collections from the last hundred years or so – interrupted occasionally by church domes. They walked down the promenade, looked out at the calm Black Sea, passed palm trees which seemed so forlorn in the freezing temperatures. The cold had a way of penetrating coats, slipping under scarves, seeping through gloves. The man soon found himself shivering, feeling weak and slightly ill. He needed warmth, food, drink. Maybe it was also the lack of sleep from the previous night. They searched the run-down streets and found a place to eat just off the main square, down some steps in a cellar. The man was surprised by its starkness – there was absolutely no decoration: just white walls, scrubbed floors, wiped tables, a steel counter. The man thought there was something Soviet about it, but it was at least very clean. He ordered fried eggs and potatoes, with a vodka to warm himself up. The food was hot and satisfyingly greasy. A little later, the vodka arrived. He'd expected the spirit to come, like in England, as a couple of centimetres of liquid at the bottom of a little glass. The waitress did bring out a shot glass – along with a flask a good six inches high, also made of glass and filled up with vodka. The man poured himself a measure. It was wonderful – pure and robust, its heat trickled snakelike down through his torso. He came back up the canteen's stairs a lot warmer and feeling that any strength or joy the previous day had sapped had now been restored.

They took a taxi – another Lada, with another windscreen crack – out to the station to get tickets for Tbilisi for the next day. The car bounced them along – they passed rows of monolithic Soviet tower blocks, the type scattered all over Eastern Europe. But these blocks had washing strung between them and chickens running in the spaces beneath. Their dinner that evening was accompanied by excellent, rather acidic, Georgian wine. That night, the bedposts thudded, the springs groaned a little less, but still an uninterrupted sleep was impossible.

The next day, the train wound them first through the lush country around Batumi and the Black Sea coast before heading higher into arid mountains. The trains were ultra-modern and correspondingly pricey. They boasted big screens, showing films of US soldiers fighting Islamists in Iraq, their crashes and bangs incongruous with the quiet upland scenery floating by. Women

boarded whenever the train stopped, selling drinks, sweets and rotund loaves of bread that rose to crested peaks in the middle. The train eventually rattled into Tbilisi, a city bounded by mountains, spreading in a broad river valley. The couple took a taxi to their hotel – another Lada, another windscreen crack, more potholed and debris-strewn roads. Despite this, Tbilisi seemed in a better state than Batumi. The buildings appeared to be in a better condition; the pavements didn't look so shattered; there seemed to be more colour, more activity. Though it was cold, the sky's blue dome beamed down on the city and its ring of mountains. The car swung past a high pillar crowned with a statue – the man recognised it as a gold-plated Saint George. With his gilded lance, he was spiking a shiny dragon. That statue seemed strange there. Sealed in its glittering metal, it hovered above the honking traffic, the bustling streets, the still-somewhat dilapidated buildings. Encased in its aura of the mythic and sacred, it floated heroically over the terrestrial cares below.

The hotel was nothing like the first – it was clean, comfortable, everything seemed to be working. Though the staff was similarly friendly, there were no heavily made-up women hanging around. No squeaking and laughing would wake the couple in the night. Foreign travellers talked to one another and chatted to the staff in the large dining room over breakfast the next morning. If anything now, the man was reminded of a Milan Kundera novel. Kundera's work was full of people who'd been driven from their posts as doctors and academics for offending the Party and been forced to take more routine jobs. Here people had been pushed out by the vigour of market forces and economic reforms. The woman serving breakfast had been a professor of German, the receptionist an agricultural engineer, one of the cleaners a physicist.

The German woman had to attend a conference, so the man spent time walking around Tbilisi alone. Besides Saint George, a massive but somewhat worn red star loomed over the city, with some boxlike Cyrillic letters beneath – a monument perhaps that no one had had the energy to take down. The air seemed mountain-clear though throngs of trucks and cars did their best to pollute it. The buildings were a mix – Soviet brutalism, crumbling art deco and older structures that looked like Ottoman era edifices. These were clustered into courtyards, with balconies and overhanging roofs, fronted with panels of elegantly carved wood. Each seemed coloured in a slightly different shade. Many had chimneys which, for some reason, instead of pointing up were directed out into the street, often giving you a lung-full of smoke as you passed. Beggars frequently approached the man. When they realised he was a foreigner, their faces brightened. They vigorously mimed their requests; some even stuttered a few words in English. He gave them some

Laris. Other beggars, though, didn't have the energy to approach anyone. They sat in long patient lines at the side of busy streets, behind hopeful bowls and caps, behind cardboard signs scrawled with looping Georgian letters. The man wandered on, crossing the river – its mountain speed, its blue-green waters appeared out of place in the city that bustled and belched around it. On its other side was a statue of what looked like an ancient king – imposing, granite-solemn. The man later found out this was Vakhtang I, the supposed founder of the city. Steps led to a large church on a craggy hill – a church which seemed to grow out of the rock. Below it was a walled walkway with excellent views over Tbilisi and the gushing river below. The man watched the dipping sun slide behind the mountains. The walkway seemed a place for couples. They canoodled, wrapped in leather jackets and scarves, as the watchful church loomed above.

There were excursions. The conference guests were taken to restaurants where they drank excellent wine, ate delicious soups and pasta parcels stuffed with meat and salty cheese, watched men fling themselves in sword dances as their weapons crashed and sparked. An ancient bus took them to a cathedral perched in the mountains just above the capital. It also appeared to be growing out of the surrounding rocks and boulders, and there was something cave-like about it inside. Worn walls rose up, a lake of candles flickered, frescoes peered down from sides and ceilings – moody Christs holding up stern fingers, saints ringed by flaking halos of gold. Outside women stood behind stalls, selling handmade bags and tiny wooden crosses on string. The couple bought a colourful woven bag; the seller, beaming, gave the man a miniscule cross as a present.

The couple went to an abandoned city in the mountains, supposedly one of the world's oldest. A bend of a clear, wide river looped around its remains. In the distance, snowy summits thrust triangles of white into the sky's blue. The city had once been an important trading post, straddling the Silk Road between Europe and China. Caves, which had housed ancient shops and living quarters and even a whole monastery, had been gouged into a hillside, but there were few remnants of walls and buildings. Subtler remains were littered among a jumble of rocks, boulders and crags, but with an experienced eye they could easily be seen. And an experienced eye soon provided itself. A man walked up, shook their hands, began chatting, pointing things out, communicating in an enthusiastic mix of English and Russian. The couple realised he was a guide – the tour had already started and the price hadn't been agreed, but they had little choice but to go along with it. The guide showed them the main street, the markings of houses and markets, public baths and grain stores, the pits in the road where criminals had been imprisoned. "Not