

Unison

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The machine wants her to think about her brother.

“Whatever comes,” says the technician through the speaker. “Don’t steer it. Don’t try to be fair. Fair is not your job today.”

Nino Beridze lies in the white tube with her hands folded on her stomach and listens to the coils knock. There are two of them, and they are not in tune. One thumps at something near a low A, the other a hair flat, and the two notes rub against each other in a slow wah, wah, wah, roughly one beat a second. She cannot stop hearing it. She has tuned pianos for eleven years, and her ears do not switch off because a court has asked her to lie still.

“Levan,” the technician says. Her name is Eka. She has a soft, tired voice, like a nurse at the end of a long week. “Just his name. Let it do what it does.”

Levan. Twenty two years old. A courier on a yellow scooter with a box on the back, who ate standing up and called their mother every night at midnight from wherever he was, so she would stop worrying and go to sleep. Levan on the embankment road at 02:47 on a wet April night, three years ago, and a minibus coming the other way with its driver asleep at the wheel after her second shift in a row.

The coils knock. Wah, wah, wah.

“Good,” says Eka. “Now her.”

The Restorative Sentencing Act came into force the year before Levan died, and for a while it was all anyone in Tbilisi talked about. Two scans, the newspapers explained, with diagrams. The first is for the offender: a reading of the regions that light when a person is genuinely, physically sorry, as opposed to performing it for a judge. The contrition index. The second is for the victim, or for the family if the victim cannot attend: a map of residual harm. How much of the wound is still open, and how much of it is pointed at the person in the dock.

You put the two numbers into a formula, the formula gives a range, and the judge chooses within it. No more sentences decided by who cried best on the stand. No more lawyers coaching remorse. Brains do not lie, the Minister of Justice said on television, and people liked that, because everybody has stood in a courtroom or a kitchen and been lied to by a face.

Tamar Kapanadze’s scan was three weeks ago.

Nino sat in the second row beside her mother and watched the result come up on the screen above the judge: a grey outline of a skull, seen from the top, and inside it a bloom of orange like a lamp left on in an empty house. Contrition index 0.91. Eka, who had run the scan, said in her even voice that she had seen only a handful of readings above 0.9 in four years of work.

Someone behind Nino said, “Ghmerto,” under his breath. The judge wrote something down.

Tamar herself did not look at the screen. She was fifty eight, with short grey hair and big hands that she kept flat on the table as if she were afraid they would do something without her. She had driven the number 37 minibus for nineteen years. She had pleaded guilty on the first day. She had never once looked toward the second row.

“She’s sorry,” Nino’s mother said afterwards on the courthouse steps, lighting a cigarette with hands that shook. “Good. Let her be sorry in prison.”

“That’s the point, Deda. The number goes into the formula. Sorry means less prison.”

“Then they need your number.” Manana took Nino’s face between her hands, the way she used to when Nino was small and had told a lie. “You tell that machine what she did to us.”

Nino tunes pianos for the music school on Griboedov Street, for two churches, for a jazz bar in Sololaki whose upright is drowning slowly in spilled wine, and for anyone in the city who still owns a piano and can pay. The work is mostly listening.

A piano has three strings for most of its notes, and the three must sound as one. You tune the first to the fork, then bring the second toward it, and as it comes close you begin to hear the beating: a pulse in the sound, a slow throb, because two notes that are almost the same are fighting each other. The closer they come, the slower the beat. Four a second. Two. One. Then the beat stretches so long you have to hold your breath to hear it, a swell every three seconds, every five, and then you stop.

People think unison means the beating has gone. It hasn’t. Two real strings are never exactly the same. Unison is when the beat is so slow that nobody in the room can hear it anymore, not even you, and the two strings sound like one note.

She explained this to Levan once, in her flat, with the old Petrof she inherited from her grandmother. He listened properly, the way he always listened to things he didn’t care about, because he cared about her.

“So it’s never finished,” he said.

“It’s finished when you stop hearing it.”

“That’s cheating.”

“That’s tuning.”

He laughed with his mouth full of khachapuri and got crumbs on the keys, and she shouted at him, and he cleaned them with the edge of his sleeve, and that was a Tuesday, and there were never going to be that many more Tuesdays, and neither of them knew.

The thing she has not told her mother, or her advocate, or anybody, is about the bakery.

It is on a corner in Didube, across the road from the minibus depot: a narrow room with a round clay oven sunk into the floor, the kind every neighbourhood in Tbilisi has, where the bakers lean down into the heat and slap the dough against the inside wall and fish the long boat-shaped loaves out with a hook. It opens at three in the morning for the drivers starting the early routes. Since the accident, Tamar Kapanadze has not been allowed to drive, and the court ordered her to do pretrial community work while she waited. Somebody, somewhere, decided that community work meant carrying flour sacks at the bakery across from the depot where she used to be a driver.

Nino found this out from a court document fourteen months ago. She went the first time because she could not sleep, which was true of most nights then. She told herself she wanted to see. She wanted to see Tamar Kapanadze doing something hard and small and humiliating, under a bare bulb, with the drivers she used to joke with coming in and pretending not to know her.

She saw it. It did not help. She went back the next week anyway.

She has been going ever since: not every night, but most weeks, at three, in her coat, with her tuning hammer still in her bag. She buys one loaf. She stands by the door where the cold comes in and eats the heel of it while it is too hot to hold. The baker, a heavy, quiet man called Gocha, has learned to have one ready for her.

Tamar recognised her the third time. Nino saw it happen: the big hands stopped on the sack, the shoulders went up. Then Tamar put the sack

down and went into the back room and did not come out until Nino had gone.

After that it became a sort of arrangement neither of them had agreed to. Nino came. Tamar did not hide anymore, but she did not look up either. They were in a small hot room together for ten minutes, a few nights a month, and neither of them said a word. Once, in January, Tamar caught her wrist on the oven's lip and made a sound like a kicked dog, and Nino, who was nearest the tap, filled a cup with cold water and held it out before she had decided anything. Tamar put her wrist in the cup. Gocha found a bandage. Nino left without her bread.

She has thought about that cup many times since. She has decided it was reflex. Anyone would have done it. She would have done it for a dog.

"Now her," Eka says again, through the speaker. "Tamar Kapanadze. Picture her. Whatever comes."

What comes is the bare bulb and the flour on Tamar's forearms, and then the courtroom and the orange bloom on the screen, 0.91, and Nino feels the old anger rise up her throat like heat from the oven, and she thinks, good. Good. Measure that.

The coils knock. Wah. Wah. Wah.

The results take four days. Her advocate, Dato Lomidze, a young man with an expensive watch and a habit of saying "Look" before every sentence, calls her into his office to read them together before the court receives them.

"Look," he says. "Here's the thing. I've asked Ms Gelashvili to come and walk us through it, because it's... Look. It's not what we expected."

Eka is sitting in the corner with a laptop on her knees. She is older than her voice, with reading glasses pushed up into her hair. She turns the screen toward Nino: the same grey skull from above, but this map has two colours. A great deal of deep blue, spread through the middle of the

brain like water in a basin. And, over on one side, a small, pale patch of red.

“The blue is grief,” Eka says. “There’s a lot of it. I want to be clear about that, because people misread these. Your harm score is high. You are not, in any sense, over this.”

“Good,” says Nino. She doesn’t know why she says it.

“The red is attribution. It’s the part of the harm that is directed at a person. Blame, anger, the wish for them to pay. In most families at this stage, the red is bigger than the blue. Sometimes it’s most of the map.” Eka touches the pale patch with one finger. “Yours is very small. Your grief is for your brother. It isn’t really pointed at her anymore.”

The office is very quiet. There is a clock somewhere ticking, and Nino catches herself listening to whether it is even.

“That’s wrong,” she says.

“It’s possible,” Eka says. “It’s a measurement. Measurements are wrong sometimes. I’ve been doing this for four years and I would say it’s wrong less often than people are.”

“I hate her.”

“I’m sure you feel that.” Eka takes her glasses down and folds them. “The scan doesn’t measure what you feel, exactly. It measures what your brain is doing when you think about her. Those usually match. Not always. Sometimes people have stopped doing a thing before they’ve noticed they’ve stopped.”

Dato clears his throat. “Look. In practical terms. If this goes in, the formula gives a range of community restitution to eighteen months. With her contrition score, the judge goes to the bottom. She does not go to prison.”

“And if it doesn’t go in?”

He leans forward. This is the part he wanted to say. "Article twenty nine. A victim's scan is medical data. You have the right to seal it. If you seal, the court can't see it, and the formula uses the presumed harm value for a death in the family. Which is high. Look, it's designed to be high, so that nobody's punished for protecting their privacy. Sealed, she's looking at three to four years."

"So I can choose."

"Nobody would ever know what it said. That's the whole point of the article."

Nino looks at the pale red patch. It is the size of a thumbnail. She thinks of the cup of water. She thinks, I would have done it for a dog.

"I want a rescan," she says.

Eka shakes her head, kindly. "You can have one. I'd advise against it. You'd be lying in that tube trying to produce a feeling, and the scan can see that too. It would come back as a mess and the court would use the first one or nothing."

She does not call her mother. Her mother calls her, every evening, at nine, and Nino lets it ring.

She does not tune anything for three days. On the fourth day the jazz bar calls about the drowning upright, and she goes, because it is something to do with her hands. She sits at the piano in the empty bar at noon with the shutters down and the chairs on the tables, and works through the middle octaves one note at a time, and listens to the beating slow and slow and disappear, and does not think about anything at all until she reaches the F above middle C and finds herself unable to tell whether the beat is gone or whether she has simply stopped wanting to hear it.

She sits there with her hammer on the pin for a long time.

The night before the hearing, she goes to the bakery at three.

It is October, and the first cold is in the air, the kind that comes down the river from the mountains and makes the whole city smell of woodsmoke and wet leaves. The depot lights are on across the road. Three drivers are standing outside with paper cups, laughing at something on a phone. Inside, the oven breathes. Gocha has her loaf ready before she has closed the door.

Tamar is at the back, stacking empty trays. She looks up, the way she never does, and then she does something she has never done: she wipes her hands on her apron and comes over.

Gocha suddenly finds he has something to do outside.

“They told me,” Tamar says. Her voice is lower than Nino expected, hoarse, a smoker’s voice or a voice from shouting over an engine. “My lawyer. He said your result came. He said he didn’t know what was in it, but your side had asked for time. He said that usually means it’s bad for me.”

Nino says nothing. The bread is burning her fingers through the paper.

“I want to tell you something,” Tamar says. “I’m not asking you for anything. I just want to say it once, because they never let me.”

“You said it in court.”

“No. I said guilty in court. I never said the rest. My lawyer told me not to. He said, the scan says it for you, if you say it out loud they’ll think you’re performing, it can only hurt. And then the scan said it.” She laughs, a short ugly sound. “Zero point nine one. Everybody looked at the screen. They put a number on it and they all nodded, and that was it, that was me being sorry, it was finished. Nobody ever needed to hear it from me.”

She takes a breath. Her big hands are at her sides and they are shaking, very slightly, the way Manana’s did on the courthouse steps.

“I’m sorry,” Tamar says. “I’m sorry about your brother. I was so tired I couldn’t see. I should have stopped. I knew I should have stopped. I think about it every single time I close my eyes, and I close my eyes

a lot, because I don't sleep anymore. That's all. I don't need you to do anything with it. I just wanted it to come out of my mouth, and not out of a machine."

The oven ticks as it cools between batches. Outside, one of the drivers laughs again.

"I come here," Nino says, and stops, because she doesn't know how the sentence ends. She tries again. "I've been coming here for fourteen months. I thought it was to watch you."

Tamar nods slowly.

"I don't know what it was," Nino says.

"I know," says Tamar. "I've been here for all of it."

They stand there. Nino realises she is waiting for something, a feeling, a click, the moment in the films where something breaks open. It doesn't come. There is only the bread going cold in the paper, and the woman in front of her with flour on her forearms, and an old scar on her wrist where the oven caught her in January, healed white.

Nino tears the loaf in half and holds one half out.

Tamar looks at it for a long moment. Then she takes it.

Neither of them says anything else. Nino goes out into the cold, and walks home along the river, and the sky over Mtatsminda is just starting to turn grey when she gets in.

In the morning she tells Dato that she will not seal it.

He looks at her the way you would look at someone stepping off a bus while it was still moving. "Look," he says. "Are you sure? Once it's in, it's in. Your mother..."

"I know about my mother."

"It doesn't have to mean anything. You can let it in and still..."

“Dato. It’s mine. It’s the one thing in this whole case that’s mine. I’m not hiding it.”

The hearing takes forty minutes. The screen above the judge shows the two maps side by side: the orange bloom, and her own deep blue basin with its small red thumbprint. Nino doesn’t look at it. She watches the back of Tamar’s grey head instead. The judge reads out the formula’s range and chooses the bottom of it: eighteen months of restitution work, and a permanent ban from driving any vehicle that carries passengers.

Manana stands up in the second row before the judge has finished speaking. She doesn’t shout. She just picks up her handbag and walks out down the middle aisle, past her daughter, without turning her head, and the heavy door swings and sighs shut behind her.

Tamar turns around in her chair for the first time in three years. Her eyes find Nino’s, and hold them, and she does not smile, and neither does Nino. Then the clerk touches Tamar’s shoulder, and the moment closes.

Her mother does not answer the phone for nine weeks.

When she finally does, it is a Sunday in December, and Manana says only, “Are you eating,” and Nino says yes, and they talk for four minutes about the weather and a cousin’s wedding, and neither of them mentions the court or the machine or the red thumbprint, and that is how it is going to be now, maybe for a long time. Some nights Nino lies awake and tells herself she chose a number over her own mother. Other nights she tells herself she chose the truth. She has not decided which story is hers yet. She suspects she will keep telling both.

She still goes to the bakery. Tamar’s restitution work is there now, officially, the same sacks, the same trays, the same bare bulb, and on the nights Nino comes in, Gocha puts out two loaves instead of one.

They talk sometimes. Not much, and never about April. About the price of flour. About the drivers. About whether the old Petrof is worth restringing. Once, Tamar asks what a piano tuner actually does all day,

and Nino tries to explain it: the three strings, the beating, the way it slows as the notes come together.

“So when does it stop?” Tamar asks.

“It doesn’t. Not completely. Two strings are never the same. You bring them as close as they’ll go, and then you listen, and at some point the beat is so slow you can’t hear it anymore. That’s unison.”

Tamar thinks about this, chewing. “So how do you know when you’re there?”

Nino has been asked this question by students, and by church wardens, and once, years ago, by a boy with crumbs on his sleeve. She has always had an answer ready.

She finds, tonight, that she doesn’t want to give it. She would rather give the true one.

“I don’t,” she says. “I never know. I just stop listening for it, and then one day I notice I haven’t heard it in a while.”

Outside, the first minibus of the morning pulls out of the depot with its lights on, empty, heading for the river. Somebody else is driving it. Somewhere in the city somebody is calling their mother so she can go to sleep. The oven breathes. Tamar tears her bread and hands Nino the heel, the hot end, the part Nino always eats first, as if she has been paying attention all along.

She has, of course. Fourteen months of it, at three in the morning, in a small hot room, both of them. Neither of them has ever called it anything.

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