



Source: Peter Baker, 'Bush enters crisis over UK captives', *Washington Post*, AFP in *The Age online*, 02/04/07.

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1953. Gheorgi K had been in for two years when his daughter came to visit.

She looks thin. Her eyes are worse than before. She squints and she blinks too often, a nervous blink. Her glasses look thicker. The blinking is magnified. When he sees her his heart tightens. The sudden contraction causes real physical pain. Like the moment after he'd been swallowed by the black car, when he had been overwhelmed by helplessness and grief, when he knew that his life was being crushed and discarded.

Now, sitting opposite her in this concrete room, it happens again. He is breathless for a moment. The sensation is so strong he looks away. But where is there to look? A small window behind him shows a muddy field. The rest is four concrete walls, a peeled white wooden door and two chairs. The room is divided in two by a glass wall with a slot the size of a letterbox cut into it. A guard is in the room with them.

When Gheorgi was brought in, she was already sitting there, on the other side. She looked so nervous and so breakable. Like a little bird.

He breathes in.

He doesn't remember her like this. She was loud with a ringing laugh. She made jokes, puns, she argued. Sometimes he had felt that she was stronger than him in spirit. But now she looks small. She is fourteen, he has kept track.

'Mimi'.

He reaches through the opening in the glass. He squeezes her hand. It is damp and timid.

'Dad'. Not sure how to go on, she stops. She swallows. She looks him straight in the eye.

'The food can't be that good here, you're getting thin.'

A joke. She has made a joke. He smiles. Then chuckles sadly. She has travelled for two days and slept on train stations and finally has been brought into a small concrete room to see her father on the other side of the divider and she has made a joke. That's my girl, he thinks. He coughs. He fights with himself.

'School? How is school? Are you going well?'

'Top of the top.' She smiles, weakly. 'I got the maths award, I will be an economist I think.' He knows that is a joke.

A pause.

He looks at her, at her brow. He remembers when she was three and she had a little straight fringe, one that made her look like she had a hat of thick hair just placed on her head. He remembers her hand in his when she was little, when they were walking along King's Boulevard, with the yellow tiles, and she would skip over four tiles to land on the fifth. He remembers leaving. He remembers shouting, him shouting, his wife shouting, doors slamming, wood splintering, a table breaking, Mimi cowering in the corner. He wishes he hadn't done that, he wishes that hadn't happened, he shouldn't have shouted, he shouldn't have left, he shouldn't have fallen in love, he shouldn't have

written that book, he should have known they would come for him, he shouldn't have left her cowering, he should have stayed. He wants to undo everything up to the present moment.

He stops the remembering. Squeezes her hand hard.

She wears a brown coat. It looks shabby. He does not want his daughter to look shabby.

'How did you travel? Did you travel well?' trying to add a smile to the question.

'Train, bus, train and a fair bit of walking and waiting in between. And lugging, I feel like a well-trained donkey now, I could get a job carrying bags. I have learnt the geography of the homeland first-hand thanks to you, Dad. Another top mark coming up—geography—for sure!'

Suddenly a stream of words comes pouring out of her mouth. She talks to save him, to take the sadness out of him, to bring back the grandiose ring in his voice, to distract herself, to undo the concrete walls, to take him away and out of there. To undo everything that has brought him to this point, to unravel it and redo it. He should still be home, not here, not in this uniform. She talks and talks.

And suddenly she stops. Her words fall on the concrete floor.

'My darling. My darling.' He doesn't know what else to say.

Another pause.

'Are you eating well. Is she cooking for you?' he asks.

She looks down.

'Dad, I won't be getting fat in a hurry but I'm not wasting away. Knowledge is the best food. Isn't that what you always said?'

Gheorgi shifts in his seat. He becomes aware of the guard. The guard is sweaty, overweight and balding. He is a local who has been put in a uniform. He is there to listen for comments like this to feed back to the overseer. The overseer decides who has to do more digging of holes when it is raining. And who then fills up the holes. And he is the one who decides on the solitary.

The guard listens but pretends not to. He takes the progress of the people seriously. He takes his potential benefits seriously. If the overseer is pleased with his seriousness, then he will get the best of the local product benefits. He listens carefully, carefully enough, maybe, to procure an additional bottle of vodka for the family and perhaps some good quality top-side, even a few packets of cigarettes. His listening may benefit his children. The girl's comment about knowledge...that could be useful. What sort of knowledge? The sort he wrote in his book? The sort that got him here? The dangerous sort? So he has passed that on to his daughter, of course.

The guard shifts contentedly and stares at the wall opposite. He has something to pass on.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Bagryana Popov.*