

Dear Russia

Alexander Thomas Kiknadze

Dear Russia,

Our relationship was shaky from the start. I remember waking to my mother's calm yet urgent voice on a summer day in 2008 in my family's Sololaki apartment (do you even know where that is in Tbilisi, or do you just invade and consume countries with mindless hunger?). My mother said we had to leave, the reason why my five-year-old mind could not yet comprehend. Nonetheless, my sister and I got out of our beds. My baby brother's screeches resonated throughout the house as we packed "only what is needed," as my father demanded. I made sure to take my prized possession, a stuffed sheep. I held it close in the family living room as my parents bickered quietly before my father rushed out of the house. I looked to my mother for guidance, but she grabbed my brother and told us we must leave. I gripped my sister's hand as we walked down the apartment's stairs and squeezed ourselves into a car. My sister pestered my mother, demanding to know what was happening; my mother reluctantly said that you, Russia, had invaded and that your planes were seen over the capital. I remained quiet the whole time, gripping my sheep and wondering where my father had gone.

My father always told me you were evil, how you had attacked and killed Georgians for generations, that you were a corrupted beast without logic or reason. He recounted how you had orphaned my grandfather, killed my great-grandfather, and imprisoned my great-grandmother. You were the Boogeyman.

Upon reuniting with my father at a friend's house out of the city, my family and I drove to the airport and took flight to Armenia. I remember the plane shaking violently, worrying that

your missiles and tools of destruction had hit our small and dated aircraft. However, I dared not show my fear; I simply clutched my toy sheep and bit my inner cheeks as I always had.

At 18, you confirmed my lifelong belief of your boundless hunger as you invaded another of your neighbors yet again. Two of my closest friends, Alex and Tykhon, grew closer in our shared hatred of you; they, Ukrainian, and I, Georgian, prayed for your demise. Shouted names at any claimed you, calling them pigs and monsters. I looked at this as justice: any who were born on your land or even held your air we considered enemies. I remember endless discussions in bars, parties, and classrooms where we would preach that your death was mandatory and that your people were evil – as if we had the side of morality and reason.

At five years old, I had never heard of Armenia, yet in that same 2008 summer, my family and I took refuge there before flying back to the States. The hotel we stayed in was calm and quiet, save my family, who were frantic and afraid. I recall sitting on the hotel room floor, sheep toy in hand, watching on television as a convoy of your tanks rolled into Georgia. My father was furious, and why shouldn't he have been? His anger, like a contagion, infected me with rage toward you and your violence. My solution: to promise to bring about your destruction, a promise to one day destroy you and wipe you out from all books, signs, and mouths.

My father taught me many things: first, to always keep my word. I've always kept the promises I've made in life, almost to a fault. He also taught me a song that my siblings and I would march behind him and sing as we paraded around any house we lived in. It was a Georgian song which translated, goes something like this: "Let's go, sign up for the Georgian army naaa na na na naaa na na." My father joked that we were to fight you and join the army,

but as I grew older, that became less and less of a joke to me. You see, my father taught me that there is such a thing as evil, and its name is Russia. With all I witnessed you do, how could I not believe it?

My mother, on the other hand, was a very open-minded woman. She always told me no one is intentionally evil. She had boundless patience and understanding. When I ripped the tag off of a stuffed sheep and forced her hand to buy the overpriced toy, she didn't scold me but rather told me to take care of the toy because it was expensive and I would not be getting another for a while. She taught me how to care. When my brother came into the world, she showed me how to hold him and calm him when he cried, and how to show compassion to someone I would be competing with for attention, food, and, most importantly, toys. So when my little brother eventually took my sheep toy, I did not protest but gave it to him.

Maybe, Russia, if you had a mother like mine, you would've learned to share with your neighbors and brothers in the east of Europe and along your borders. When the war broke out in Ukraine, many of your people fled to Georgia. My mother allowed a Russian reporter to rent our apartment despite my father's protests because there are good Russians. Russians who wish for change, to not live under tyranny. So, I will, for the first time in my life, break a promise. If I can see through my rage and hatred towards you, and if I am capable of breaking my promise, I know you can break the cycle of violence and destruction that litters your past.

Yours truly,

Alexander Thomas Kiknadze