

A RETURN TO NORMAL

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In spite of the joy which filled him, he tarried with opening his eyes. He couldn't believe today was the day he would leave this place and become a truly free man. He got up lazily, his stomach was tight, but nevertheless he ate a light breakfast, to have at least some energy. He started packing his stuff. He looked at every object, as each of them contained a fragment of his life story, in each of them he saw the past, which wasn't bright. He sat on the bed and waited with impatience, but also with uncertainty, because he didn't know how his life would look like now. It won't be easy, for sure. He will have to change his habits and behaviours.

Finally came the moment when the door opened, then the second one, another, and finally he was standing in front of the last barrier separating him from freedom. The huge metal gate looked different than before. It wasn't impassable anymore, it seemed light, easy to cross. He passed through the last security check and finally the gate opened and he stepped to the other side...

The city centre emitted sounds he hasn't heard in 25 years. It was noisy, too noisy. He stood in front of the gate, lit up a cigarette, not looking back, wanting to leave behind him everything he'd lived through. He knew perfectly well he needed to move, he couldn't stand in one place, but his legs felt like jelly. He sat on a bench, looked around, and despite having a plan prepared a long time ago, he began to wonder where to start. He had many opportunities now, he could do things that were impossible for him before, and which were normal for everyone else.

After almost an hour, he stood up and bought today's paper in a kiosk. He walked through midtown with high office buildings, sun glittering in the windows. Strings of cars moved through the alleys. He felt trapped between them. Tension grew with every minute. He wondered why it was so. He was a free man. No one could take his freedom away from him.

He sat on a bench again, this time in a park. He opened the newspaper and started reading it, breathing the fresh spring air. He had two hours left till the train was leaving, so he decided to stay in the park and wait, he didn't have the strength to do anything else.

The noise at the train station was terrible. He wasn't used to it. He bought the ticket, went to the platform and opened a cold bottle of Coke, which he'd wanted to drink for a long time. He felt like a savage among few dozen people waiting for the train. It seemed everyone was looking straight at him. He tried not to get paranoid. Many people told him it would be like that. He didn't believe them, but now he personally found out it was true.

The train stopped with a squeal of brakes at a small station in the middle of nowhere. He quickly got off, crossed the street and lit up a cigarette. He would like to sit down again but he knew he didn't have time for that. It was already late. So he started walking. He passed houses, little shops that hadn't been here before. He felt as if he was in a different place. Everything was strange. Suddenly he thought of something. He began to wonder how they would react to him, if anyone would welcome him at all. This thought accompanied him for the next two kilometres. In a shop, he quickly bought a small gift he'd thought of earlier and continued walking. He wasn't far.

The small estate with single family houses differed from the rest of the world by the fact that not much had changed here in the last 25 years. He couldn't see a new house. Even rubbish bins stood in exactly the same places. He started to feel like home. Many memories flooded him, but he knew he couldn't think too much now. There would be time for that later.

He turned into the last little street and walked to the end of it. The old fence he saw was begging for some paint. He realized with joy that he would finally be able to fix it. He opened the gate quietly and made small steps on old paving blocks. Only three stairs left. He stepped on each of them with great solemnity, watching every knot, which seemed to contain the story of this place. He stood in front of the door and knocked shyly.

The door didn't open but he felt somebody's presence on the other side. The only thing he didn't know was if this somebody wanted to open the door. He waited impatiently. He knocked again, but the door still seemed as if walled in. Tears came to his eyes. He turned around, walked down the stairs, lit up another cigarette and tried to calm down. It wasn't easy, but he knew that getting control of his emotions was the most important thing. He stood there for fifteen minutes and wondered if somebody was inside or not.

An hour passed and he couldn't move. He smoked one cigarette after another and drank water. He heard the click of the lock opening. He turned around but the door looked the same as before. Maybe his brain was producing sounds he unconsciously wanted to hear. He stood still and decided he needed to go. The worst was the awareness that he didn't know what to do. He had nowhere to go. He grabbed his bags and started moving towards the gate. Suddenly he stopped. The click of the lock again. Yes, it had to be that sound. He couldn't mishear it twice. He went to the door, the rush of adrenaline and emotions didn't even allow him to stop. The door opened very slowly, reluctantly but unwaveringly. He stood as if rooted to the ground. A face started to appear behind the door. He recognized it instantly. He had no doubt.

They stood facing each other. Emotions didn't let them utter even one word. They hadn't seen each other for 15 years. That was the last time she came visiting and told him she no longer

had the strength to come. Physical strength, but also mental strength. He tried to get together and unblock his vocal chords and finally he said in a quiet, hoarse voice:

“Mum, it’s me, I’m back...”

“Hello, son, I’ve been waiting for you for the whole 25 years...”

They both entered the house, wanting to get back to normal. The only thing they didn’t know was if the normal would ever return...