



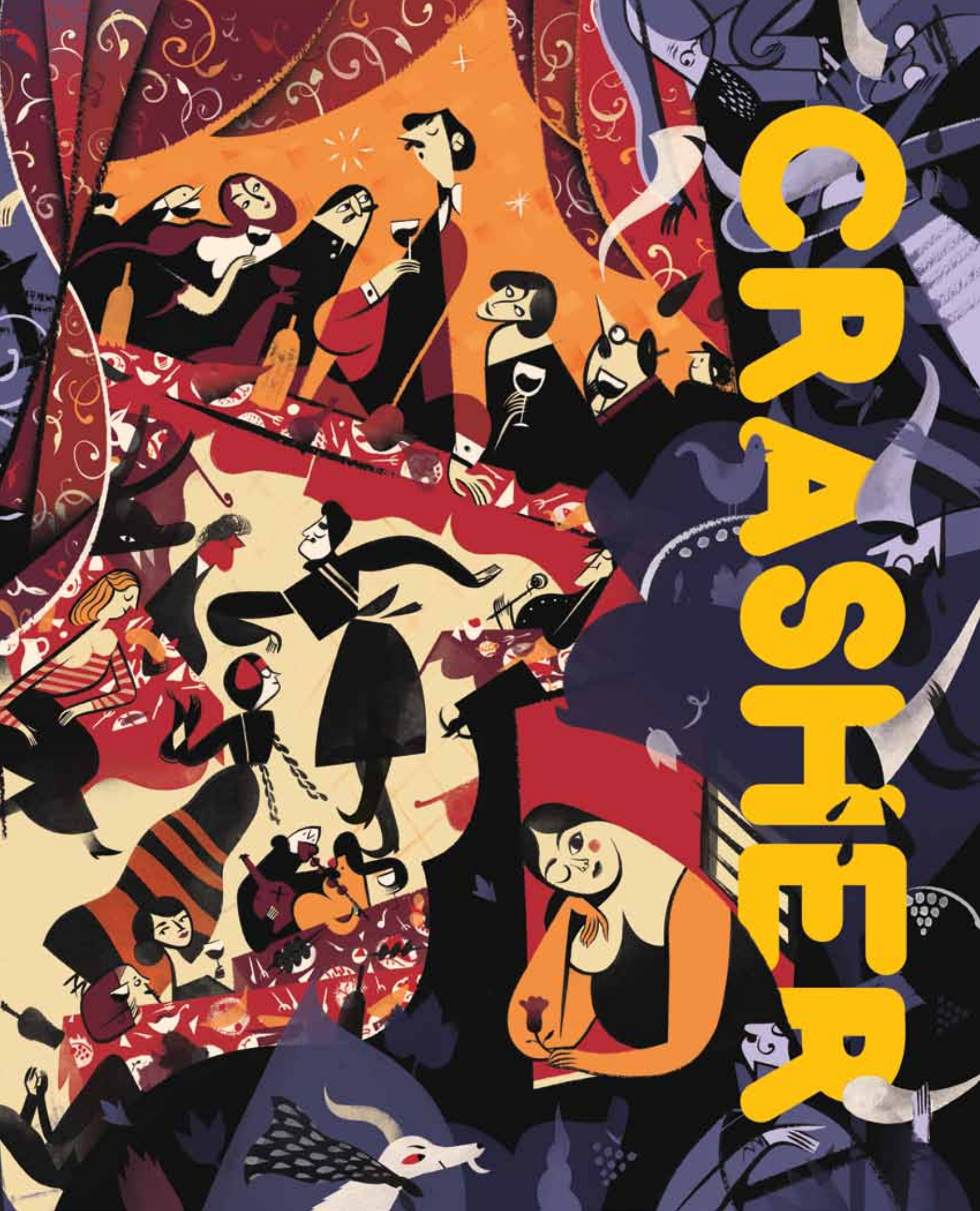
# NOZZLES

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# CRASH





## THERE'S A HIGH, STRATEGIC SOUTHERN RIDGE

that supervises the bend in the River Mtkvari where warm sulfur springs inspired the founding of the city of Tbilisi, the capital of the Republic of Georgia. On the easternmost edge of the ridge sprawls the battered keep of a ruined citadel, a defensive position occupied by the invading empires of the Persians, the Arabs, the Mongols, the Turks, and, most recently, the Russians. To the west is the chrome-siloed command sanctum of Georgia's secretive billionaire prime minister and his albino children. Between them stands serenely Mother Georgia.

Mother Georgia is a strong aluminum woman of some twenty meters. Her protuberant breasts swell from what looks like the outside of her plated armor. In her right hand, she holds aloft a bowl of wine. In her left hand, lowered to her long, slender, sheet-metal belly, is a sword. The guidebooks explain that she embodies the two signal virtues of this kingdom wedged between the mountains: the generosity of the host, who welcomes all comers with food and drink, and the courage of the warrior, who has defended herself, valiantly and without reasonable hope, against the clockwork onslaughts of imperial whimsy. The other interpretation is that she's brandishing the sword to make sure you finish the wine.

Her smiling enforcement of excess has been taken up by Georgia's ritual toastmasters. The Georgian ritual feast is called a *supra*, which means set table, and the toastmaster



is called the *tamada*. At a wedding, a traditional tamada is expected to give the newlyweds a sense of their connection to Georgia's national saga—the incessant incursions of imperial armies and the spirited, courageous defense of the mountain strongholds—as well as practical advice and encouragement. It's an exceedingly honorable position, and the best of them are known across their home regions for their eloquence, pacing, and windy familiarity with history and legend, as well as their ability to consume eight to ten liters of wine over the course of two dozen toasts without ever seeming drunk. Georgians will throw a supra for just about anything—a funeral, a new job, the celebration of an improvised and still half-finished home-improvement project—but weddings are their favorite pretext.

I am at the age when time is largely meted out as the interim between weddings, and recently there have been several of great significance. In the span of a month last year, both my girlfriend's sister and my brother had gotten married, and my girlfriend and I had been spending a lot of time talking about the toasts we were expected to give. Even her father had gotten in on our discussions; he'd been sending me YouTube clips of what he thought were successful toasts, models of what he might achieve. I was not immune to his sense of occasion. A great deal of energy, it seemed, went into the personalization of the wedding day, the whole mosaic of details that distinguished one wedding from the next.

My own take was that the best chance of distinction lay in the toasts; nobody but the couple would remember if the drinks were served in mason jars or empty votive candle holders, but the right wedding toast could really bring a room together.

That sort of toast is one of the few times in one's life when one's invited to mark a moment, to help articulate the swarming good wishes and hopes of a community that might only be assembled in this particular configuration one time, and it was something I took very seriously. While deadlines for other work sailed past almost unnoticed, I felt mounting pressure to put together a toast that would properly celebrate and send off my brother and his fiancée—a few minutes that would help elaborate the foundational legend of their life together—which meant that I, like my girlfriend's father, was spending a lot of time trawling the Internet for inspiration. This is how I discovered that the Georgians advertised themselves as the world's most profligate tributary drinkers. The Georgian emphasis on the importance of the wedding toast was something that I, as a person of some literary aspiration and commensurate self-importance, could get behind; I was curious about the formal elevation of public drunken garrulousness to the status of ritual. I wanted to observe a supra. I wanted to see, furthermore, if they'd in fact come up with a foolproof way to make an observant into a participant; for this was what it meant to instantiate the right fleeting community.

**A**bout ten minutes after my plane landed in Tbilisi, I had three weddings to go to. There was Wi-Fi in the airport, and as I stood in line at passport control I paged through two e-mails delivering the excited news that village weddings had been discovered, and that, in accordance with the old Georgian saying "A guest is a gift from God," I was to be an honored visitor at each. Some of the Georgians I had reached out to before the trip had mentioned that

it was actually sort of hard to go to Georgia and not find yourself invited to one wedding or another. They also said that most Georgians never plan anything in advance, especially weddings. All of this appealed to me; what it communicated was that Georgia was not a place where a wedding had to be a special, fragile flower, but was something with a traditional form so robust it could be assembled both hastily and with great confidence. It was a ritual with conviction.

One would take place the following day, a Saturday, in a village near the Black Sea, on the opposite side of this fortunately small country. It was about a six-hour drive, and I was advised that I'd have to take the first *marshrutka*, or cramped minibus, in the morning to make it there in time. The second wedding would take place on Sunday, also near the Black Sea, but in the far northwest, within a twenty-minute drive of the border with the Russian-sponsored breakaway republic of Abkhazia. The third I arranged while waiting in line at passport control, and it conflicted with the first.

As I approached an immigration official, a woman in the neighboring line loudly and irrelevantly told her own immigration official, in slightly accented American English, that she had flown in from Kansas City for the wedding of her stepson. I took advantage of what I hoped would be our shared air-travel disorientation to approach her as we walked toward baggage claim. I told her I was a writer interested in the cheers of the Georgian supra, and I couldn't help overhearing that she was in town for a wedding.

She did not look at me oddly. "Yes, I am. Thirteen months ago, my stepson came here with my husband to visit a former exchange student of ours here. It was my stepson's college graduation trip." He had fallen in

love with a Georgian, stayed behind, and the two were to be wed the next day in a suburban village on a hillside outside of the capital. She didn't so much invite me formally as tell me that if I accompanied her to the curb I might get the church's address from her husband, who'd already been in the country for a week to help his son prepare.

I hadn't even left the airport and already I was going to have to turn down an invitation for at least one wedding, an invitation that had taken considerable effort to obtain, and the refusal of which was sure to cause some offense.

In the meantime, I had also secured a non-wedding supra to attend, conveniently located two doors down from the Airbnb apartment where I was staying. At the last minute, I had written my host and asked if he knew of a supra I might attend.

"You are in luck," he responded immediately. "We have a supra at my home on Friday." I'd been warned in advance about the deracinated supras of Georgia's urban elite. These people, I'd been told, were squandering the tradition by breaking all of the rules. They talked during the toasts, for one, and, perhaps even more gravely, they allowed themselves to sip desultorily from their wineglasses. At a classic supra, one sips water or soda to slake one's thirst; it's only when the tamada finishes each toast that one may, which is to say one must, rise and drain one's glass. The urban young people, I heard more than once, were no longer interested in the texture and pace of the ritual as it had long been practiced, but only wanted to get drunk as quickly as possible. This seemed a peculiar way to lament the contemporary decline of an institution that had for a thousand years been dedicated to

getting everyone drunk as quickly as possible. I'd long ago grown bored with authenticity questions, but it did seem a live issue to Georgians and their admirers. One of the dozens of people trying to help me find a wedding supra to crash mentioned not offhandedly in an e-mail that the supras of the Tbilisi gentry were rather like the bullshit Passover seders enjoyed by fallen New York Jews. One of the things I'd find, though, after a home supra, a wealthy urban supra, a poorer village supra, and finally a staged tourist supra, was that the supra is designed to be a self-consuming artifact. After the first few toasts, a supra could be conducted on the moon and everybody would still rise to the expectations of the occasion.

Within an hour of touching down I was seated in Tbilisi's Old Town, in the long shadow of Mother Georgia with her wine and her sword, at my depraved urban Airbnb supra. I'd been slightly worried that the whole thing was being staged for my benefit. I was fortunate in that there was another pretext: two sponsored food bloggers from France. Our hosts were an artist called Tamaz, along with his wife and teenage daughter. Tamaz filled our wineglasses, explaining that he had made the wine himself, below the kitchen, from the grapevines hanging over the dangerously tilted circular staircase in the rear courtyard. Tbilisi is a city of stairways long departed from their traditional axes and precipitous, slapdash wooden balconies with unmoored balustrades. Over all of them are draped the long strands of minor home vineyards. I suppose Tamaz's wine was what one would call white, but it was really something closer to a plummy amber, with the cloudy cast of unfiltered cider, or desert urine.

The toasts of a supra are structured, and the first one is always to God. Tamaz stood at the small, crowded table, and spoke for about five minutes. I loved listening to the language. It's one of the mellower of the *kh*-intensive languages, like a lullaby sung to a wolf brood. It's a little craggy but there are meadows, too. Only on rare occasion does it feature strings of more than five consecutive consonants. Georgians take great pride in the fact that their alphabet has thirty-three letters. They seem well aware that this is some 25 percent more than English has. Presumably some of them are vowels.

When Tamaz was finished, his daughter translated. "He says we have to thank God for having been born, and for giving us all we have, and that without God we would not have our health or our happiness. *Gaumarjos!*" *Gaumarjos* is Georgian for "cheers," though it literally means "Be victorious!" We drained our glasses and sat down and the first thing everybody reached for was *khachapuri*, the staple Georgian starch, to quell the cold bloom of vinegar sloshing in our guts. Where some cultures have rice and others have pita, Georgians accompany every meal with cheese bread. There are some regional variations, which occupy the narrow eggy carbohydrate gamut that runs from thick white pizza to bricks of lasagna. There were other dishes on the table—in fact, there was nothing but dishes on the table—and one of them was grimly recognizable as a vegetable, but the engine of Georgian consumption, and thus the engine of Georgian culture, is *khatchapuri*. In a cunningly circular generative device, the tang of the acidic homemade wine necessitates the sop of the dough, and then the gluey parcel of sop won't budge



until it's cut with more wine. The other participant in this dynamic is Georgian water. The spring water is famous throughout the Soviet Union for its salt and mineral content. It tastes like a distant sea run through an old metal Brita filter.

Everything—the astringent wine and the caustic water; the torn, coarse bread and the wedges of smoked cheese—tastes of ore and fat and tears, and the only recourse is more salty water and more tart wine. This whole process is helped along by the rhythm of the toasts. The first five or six toasts are customarily given in rapid succession. This is mostly so that whatever resistance may have existed to the prospect of the second five or six toasts is dealt with early and decisively, such that the third set of five or six toasts faces no hesitation whatsoever.

Tamaz rose (and we rose with him) to offer another toast, this one to love. He spoke slowly, took long pauses, shifted registers, changed clip. His wife laughed. At the end of maybe four minutes, his daughter raised her glass. “He says that love is very important in our lives, and that love is the thing that brings us together.” We held our glasses aloft, waiting for her to elaborate, but she was finished. We shrugged and drained our glasses.

The Frenchman turned to me. “Something here, I think, is being lost in the translation.” This seemed accurate, but the mood at the table was so easy and full of goodwill that it was easy to forgive the lapses.

Then the blogger, inspired by the two glasses of rapid-succession wine, stood to offer his own toast, but Tamaz waved him down. His daughter explained that, if you

wanted to toast, you had to wait for the tamada's invitation. We sat a moment in embarrassed silence before Tamaz saved face all around by asking the Frenchman to toast. He stood and praised friendship between the nations, and—*Gaumarjos!*—we drank. We followed the wine with a khatchapuri chaser, and then it was my turn. I delivered a long and impassioned encomium to my first encounter with Georgian hospitality, that wonderful, vicious cycle of forcible conviviality. The teenaged translator cut me off to



reissue my toast in Georgian right when she thought it was time for my encomium to end. She seemed to make a real effort to translate the whole thing; as she spoke, Tamaz looked at me and nodded thoughtfully. *Gaumarjos!*

By our eighth or ninth glass of wine and our seven thousandth calorie of khatchapuri, Tamaz seemed to recognize that things had gone perhaps a little far for seven p.m. He went to get his guitar.

“These Georgians,” the Frenchwoman said with a winsome slur, “they can’t stop singing.” They

needed, it seemed, some remissive structure, something designed to give everybody present an elegant way to opt out, for a moment, of the relentless alternation of liquor and khatchapuri. Tamaz began strumming the chord progression of “Hey Jude.” We all began together: “Hey Jude...” I continued, perhaps innocently, with the text of the actual song, but Tamaz raised his voice to sing down my lyrical fidelity, loudly braying, “Dah dah dah dah dah, di di di di, du du du du du du du.” He aggressively scatted the Beatles,

brooking no actual English words, as the Frenchwoman shook a recently materialized maraca to an internal rhythm of her own. I was more than delighted to sing dah da di with my arms around the French couple. When we all finished singing, we clapped for each other and for ourselves, and I felt so proud of our collective dah da di, and correspondingly ashamed that I’d ever been disappointed by the daughter’s perfunctory translations. All she’d been communicating, it was clear to me, was that there was just no possible way to convey the grace and dex-

terity of her father’s words in a language as blockheaded as English, and she hadn’t even tried. Tamaz’s wife brought in some very strong Turkish coffee, to make sure we wouldn’t be too tired to get more drunk later on.

Two drinks later Tamaz was on his feet again, though by then nobody was paying him much heed. I’d lost track of a few toasts, and at some point we’d left the table and were sitting around on the couches. We’d switched to *chacha*, the local variant of grappa. The Frenchman put his arm around me again. We were sharing the fruits of this death march

toward good fellowship. He gouged his index finger, plump from food blogging, into my cheek. He said, "In France, when someone gives a toast, we are never serious. We try to be witty and entertaining and to make the guests... chuckle. But we never say anything serious. The Georgians, they are serious, and they use the supra as an occasion to say serious things." He stopped for a moment, and it was clear he felt he had to say something commensurate with the serious occasion he was seriously describing. It was as though our goodwill had been extended on credit, and now it was time for that small but important debt to be paid. "My girlfriend and I," he said, "we are traveling as sponsored food bloggers for the next one year and sixth months." He looked over at her. She was staring out the window and shaking her maraca. "If it all goes like it has gone so far, at the end, in Madagascar, I will ask her to be my wife."

"Yes! Yes, me, too! I mean, not sponsored food blogging, my girlfriend would never do that in a million years, but asking her to be my wife!" I was poking him in the chest, and waving the carafe of chacha. I hadn't talked to anybody else about this. I'm not sure I'd even really articulated it to myself. What a wonderful thing this had been, this supra, this Tamaz and his wisdom, these sponsored French food bloggers, this dastardly chacha. "Let's do it, both of us. *Gaumarjos!*"

distributed across the neighborhood, and Vika was my hostess—a stout, wonderful woman in her fifties, with red hair and bangs that arched in sprouting confusion. She put down the cake and the cell phone and defiantly tugged at the tight collar of her pink bathrobe, as if her clothes were preventing her from realizing generosity's full potential. "GEEEE-DEEON, please take your cake and please take your cell phone."

"Thank you, Vika. *Madlobt.*"

"Don't mention it, don't mention it! Is that right—'Don't mention it'?"

"That's right, Vika. You can say, 'Don't mention it.'"

"Don't mention it."



It was already too late to make it across the country for the village wedding, so it looked like I was going to the American-Georgian one in the nearby suburb. I could barely recall what had happened after the Frenchman and I had discovered our profound kinship, though I dimly remembered having gotten into a loud squabble in German on a rooftop with Tbilisi's foremost literary blogger. I felt I couldn't let one supra prevent the next one, though, so I pulled myself together.

On the way to the wedding Vika only called me twice, to make sure I was going to the place with the right *kh* sound, not the pleasant

high-throated Hebrewish one, but the one that issues forth from the place where terrible beauties are born. She insisted on talking to the person next to me on the bus to make sure I was going to Tsqneti. At Tsqneti I arrived in time to witness a wedding hitch. The church had overbooked itself, so the priest asked the groom through an interpreter, his future sister-in-law, if it would be okay for them to hold a double wedding with another couple. The groom felt that that would be less special to him than a single wedding. Just like an American, I thought, wanting his wedding to be a kid-glove affair. The Georgians couldn't tell why he was making a fuss about the "specialness," but I knew where he was coming from. In any event, the bride was an hour and a half late, so the point quickly became moot. Pensioners of the forested mountain suburb lined the park benches to watch each hour's wedding.

Inside the whitewashed candlelit church I retreated to the cool clay shadows of the transept recess and watched the bride and groom accept their ornamented wedding crowns, jewels hanging forth like the lures of crystalline anglerfish. They leaned down to kiss the golden-haloed icons, then promenaded in a series of small circles trailed by witnesses as the priest chanted the orthodox mass. Their promenade complete, the bride sipped from the ceremonial chalice. The groom began to sip but his witness tipped the chalice from below. "More!" the witness whispered in English, and even the priest laughed. The groom bled the chalice dry.

The guests filed in at dusk and took up their posts at long, rectangular tables radiating outward from a wide dance floor like the jumbled spokes of a wheel disintegrating under a tremendous load. On the far side of the room, on a raised dais

Vika extended to me, in her left hand, a plate helpless beneath heavily iced brown cake; in her left hand, she held a cell phone. She looked like Mother Georgia. It was something like seven o'clock in the morning, and she was bellowing. "GEEEEDEEEEOOON!" she bellowed. Tamaz's family was running a complicated Airbnb racket

underneath sepia considerations of pre-Soviet Tbilisi and the ubiquitously reproduced warm-banquet scene of Niko Pirosmiani, Georgia's Chagall, a smaller table awaited the newlyweds and their witnesses. The tablecloths were mostly invisible under the tiling of plates, though here and there a little window of linen shone forth through the nearly uniform layer of porcelain. Clusters of drink formed the centerpiece: the sickeningly sweet national sodas in chartreuse and juniper, the crystal flagons of foamy white wine.

There was a boastful amount of food. Stockpiled on plates were: rolled baby eggplants congested with walnut paste and studded with the vitreous sparkle of pomegranate seeds; fanned wedges of *sulguni*, a brackish cheese, some smoked and some fresh; sliced patchworks of cold fried chicken and glazed ingots of cold roast piglet; lascivious tongues of stuffed red pepper; and greenish-brown brushes of what looked like tide-pool bracken. There were baskets of the coarse, torn flat bread, and no one sat more than a foot or two away from a pile of *khatchapuri*. The minute the guests entered, they set to the food without formality.

The bride's sister, Ia, organized the whole thing. She spoke better than functional English—and was thus the translator for the few Americans in attendance (though the groom's father, a military man, could get by with his Russian)—and told me that it was customary for the bride and groom to enter only after the third toasts. It's an exceptional concession, extended to young people only on their wedding night, that they're allowed to remain three drinks behind everyone else. I asked

Ia if she could take special care to translate the toasts exactly, because I was interested in the precise thing being delivered; she said she'd do her best, but that I should really try to focus on the spirit with which the toasts were given, the gestures made, and the tone taken, rather than the actual words. "It's a little like a prayer," she said. "You say the same words over and over, but what's important is you say them with special feeling."

With that in mind, Ia introduced me to the tamada, Shao, a trim man



in his early forties with a calculating look. He's the second cousin of the bride's late father, and he was chosen because of his deep familiarity with the long, illustrious, tragic history of the bride's family. The groom's party in full counts the father, the stepmother I'd approached at immigration, the mother, and a well-kept German named Amos who'd also been an exchange student with the family in Kansas City. The groom's family was happy to have another American present, if only for confused solidarity. Several members of the bride's family told me, via Ia, that guests are

always welcome in Georgia, and that they hoped I'd get enough to drink. By the end of the toasts, they said, we'll all be family, I'll see.

Two-thirds of the seats were full—perhaps eighty guests—and Ia seemed a little anxious about the absences, but Shao decided he wasn't going to indulge the delinquent invitees. He gave the first toast not to God but to peace, and spoke fluently, with the domineering bounce of a talk-show host, for five or six minutes. For the first half, the guests remained silent, but by the

end of the toast conversation had resumed. Ia was a little too preoccupied with the missing-guest situation to translate as the tamada went along, but as everyone lifted his or her glass to drink she rushed through a quick interpretation. "So, he toasted to peace, for the Georgian nation to finally have peace after so many years of war and invasion and being a part of other empires, so that Georgia may live among the nations in peace and friendship, with an end to war."

Ia turned to John, the groom's father. "Tamada says you must toast now."

"To what?" John asked.

"To peace," Ia said.

"To peace what?" John's a retired military man proud of his stiff bearing, but before the reception had assumed the chatty, patronizing diplomacy of an assistant dean of students. Now he was once again alive to the chain of command.

"You need to fill your glass," Ia continued. I was seated next to him, and poured. I was alive to the chain of command, too. "Yes, that's right. Now stand up, raise your glass, and say you want to take this special opportunity to toast to the



everlasting peace of the Georgian people, after all the wars they've been through."

John proceeded as instructed. He'd clearly done some preparing for this possibility, and he mentioned not just war in general but the recent war with Russia, still fresh in everybody's mind. I thought he did an honorable job, and I raised my glass to him. Ia waited until he was finished, then spoke in Georgian, at much greater length. Her translation met periodic cheers. When she finished, glasses swung high, and all the men downed the brown wine. Three musicians near the dais picked up their long-necked, three-stringed Georgian mandolins and plucked out a medley of patriotic nationalist hymns, occasionally breaking into foreign songs gaily faked with nonce syllables. While the glasses were refilled, each person in the service of his or her neighbor, servers continually delivered hot dishes as though on conveyor belts, balancing each new addition on the rims of the plates below it: saucers of phyllo-wrapped chicken egg rolls, like Turkish stuffed cigars; polished bronze tureens of something sheepishly described to me as liver but was clearly scraps of spicy rosemary offal, like a *kokoretsi*; and clabbering puddles of gelatinous hominy grits, which the groom's family was pleased to recognize as grits, then condemn as tasteless. The layer of cold starters was quickly plated over, though guests continued to draw portions from each stratum. At least half the dishes were decorated with pomegranate seeds, whose role as bright, ubiquitous garnish seems to underline its symbolic presence vis-à-vis Hades and everything. This country

was known to the Greeks, and must know its myths, and is self-aware enough about its draconian hospitality that it's no surprise they'd adorn each table with insistent reminders that there are always consequences to the acceptance of the most trivial-seeming gifts.

The bride and groom strode in to great fanfare; everybody stood, glass in hand. They were a toast or two early but nobody seemed to be standing on ceremony. They entered onto a short red carpet



strewn with rose petals and framed by a series of plastic white columns that come to the groom's shoulders. They stopped at the head of the carpet, where the bride showed the groom that they were supposed to smash to smithereens a porcelain plate. (I almost yelled, "Mazel tov!") The tamada toasted the newlyweds, hoping and predicting that they would be happy and healthy and enjoy many children.

Mere glasses of wine were apparently from then on incommensurate with the occasion, so they brought out the *khantsi*, or

drinking horns. There's a dual theoretical basis to the horn-drinking practice, which dates to at least the seventh century. The first is the obvious fact that, while a standard glass cannot hold a liter of wine at one time, a standard horn can. The second is that horns culminate in sharp ulterior points rather than accommodately flat bottoms; while wine remains it can't be set down. The horn was brought to John and filled. Ia shrugged. "You hold up the horn, you make a toast to the families of bride and groom,

you have no choice but to drink all wine in horn or you will not honor the union of these two families. When you are finished, you hold out the horn upside and shake it over the table, to show tamada that no wine remains."

John, a man of both duty and restraint who now faced the irreconcilability of those two virtues, offered a few words about the families, Ia expanded them considerably in translation, and then John tipped back his head. Rivulets of wine poured down his collar and over his American-flag lapel pin. He lifted his head and flipped his horn

with great satisfaction, inadvertently spraying his son's mother, with whom he'd been distant but cordial, with the remaining drops of wine. The guests assembled lost it with pleasure, and many of the men came over to clap him on the back and propose that they now celebrate his first successful horn with a second, commemorative horn. Here and there men stood to interlace shirt-sleeved arms and gulp glasses over one another's shoulders. The whole thing from toast number five onward got a little loosey-goosey, and the first ad hoc

toasts—challenges to the tamada's authority—rang forth from the room's periphery.

Before the horn's devastation could spread further, the drinking was once again suspended as the overheads were dimmed and servers trotted out bearing adorable fires on bronze trays; they set down plates of pork and lamb and veal shashlik cuddled close to burning embers, along with bowls of veal ribs in *adjika* sauce and something that looked suspiciously like brains. There was no longer even a pretense of order at the table: plates were placed into precarious balance atop piles of dishes now in threes and fours, food cooling like mortar in the gaps. Slices of khachapuri from the kitchen were simply strewn and draped atop it all. I hated to be so distant and ungenerous in my acceptance of what was on offer, but I had a hangover of outlandish Georgian proportion. I tried repeatedly to explain that my first supra had simply been so successful that I was unable to rise to this consecutive occasion. People nodded with faux understanding, but there was little I could do. I could only reconcile myself to the fact that I'd be letting everybody down. But I was quickly forgiven—this was the evening's greatest point of sentimentality, when guests were drunk enough to feel moved but not so drunk they couldn't articulate it—and it was all forgotten as a troupe of folk dancers skipped in from the kitchen, the women in floor-length peasant dresses and the men in traditional black tunics with stenciled white outlines of antiquated bandoliers strung across their chests, outlines of daggers in groin scabbards.

After the dance, Ia jumped up and pushed back from the table to greet

some new arrivals, whom she quickly described to me as the event's "most appreciated guests." The guests apparently knew to arrive in order of importance, and these three—two very well-manicured and -accessorized young women and a little girl—had taken their delayed influx to the extreme. The latecomers, their slender Byzantine fingers ornamented with glittering metal, sat across from me and pulled out their iPhones. Phones and cameras, until that moment, hadn't been present.



With the next toast, the now-boisterous assembly, some of whom had begun to take to the dance floor themselves, became still. This was the tribute to the fathers and grandfathers, and Ia took her time translating this one. "This is for the men who have died defending Georgia in war, for those who have died so we can have our freedom. Tamada says he would like to honor the grandfather of the groom, who fought in the Second World War and in Korea; and the father of the groom, who fought in Vietnam; and then the father of the bride, my father." Ia paused.

"My father"—and now it was no longer clear if she was translating or making her own toast—"was a partisan general in the region now known as South Ossetia, which we Georgians have always called by the name Tshkhinvali, some sixty kilometers to the north of here, which is where our family comes from." South Ossetia is occupied by the Russians, who claim to support the independence of the South Ossetian people. "My father was a partisan general for the Georgians there, and the Russians put a price on his head. He was assassinated in the lead-up to the war with Russia in 2008, betrayed by a member of his own unit, and our whole family was threatened. We fled with only our clothing to Tbilisi, and we cannot go back." If they crossed the border, they would be killed immediately.

The toast was seconded by many others, and for a few moments the mood turned solemn, but then the tamada said something to the musicians, and the mandolin trio struck up a kind of Georgian mazurka. Glasses were emptied, horns flipped, and all was again merry.

After some group dancing, for which the tamada pulled me with considerable force onto the dance floor to join a kind of spiral hora, I found myself shuffled around into a seat by the most appreciated guests, who had thus far done little but idly scan through Instagram on their phones. They'd eaten practically nothing, and their bright, unsmudged plates stared upward from the troughs of smeared dishes with haughty reproof. One of the women had lived in New York for a decade and she explained, in excellent English with little prompting, why she was so completely bored by the surrounding saturnalia.



"None of us in our generation wants to sit and listen to the tamada, especially a boring tamada like this one. We just want to be able to drink when and how we please, and to dance at a wedding, not to have to sit here and listen to this guy go on and on and on. Like, okay, right now?" The tamada was on his feet again, though nobody was paying him much heed. "He's toasting to the uncles and cousins. I'll translate for you exactly. Okay, he says he thanks this one uncle, Gyorgy, who is a great man and can quote poetry and is a wonderful person to drink with." She paused. "Now he thanks another uncle, Shota, who is a terrific guy, and he knows this well because they once got drunk together. Now he's toasting another uncle, and he's remembering all the times they shared shots of the chacha they made in their courtyard." She waited again. "His little cousin is a good boy, and he remembers the first time he saw him finish a horn. This is what the whole thing is like, and everybody is talking and nobody is listening because he's not being smart and he's not being funny and he's not quoting poetry and this is why the tradition of the supra is dying. Nobody cares to listen to this." She looked over at the phone of her sister-in-law, who was Instagramming the image of her clean plate amid the mess.

"I have a recommendation to make. As you can see, this is about to get really sloppy." She pointed to John, who was interlaced with the older men of the family in a circle, each draining a horn, and

then to the groom himself, who stood in a receiving line of chacha bearers. The tamada and his deputy yelled at each other from across the room. "Leave now, with us in our car, because you've seen everything good, and this is only going to go downhill from here. At the village wedding you're going to tomorrow it will be poor people from the countryside, more authentic than this anyway."

It was clearly indefensible that I'd been at least partially persuaded by their wealth and their English and their ennui, but they were also giv-



ing me, in my hungover state, permission to take leave of the festivities. I went over to the groom's family, now clustered around the dais, to wish them well. John thanked me for being such a great guest, a really wonderful, terrific, thoughtful guy, and said he hoped I would have all the health and happiness in the world. He started to raise the horn that I might join him in one for the road, but when he caught my eye he let the horn fall to his side. He was a better man than I, and we both knew it. "Good luck," he said.

Vika's husband insisted on rising early to deposit me at the proper cross-country marshrutka for my trip to Zugdidi, the last stop before Abkhazia. Before we left, Vika offered me "tea." I warily accepted. When I came back from the bedroom with my bags, she'd set the table with a pannier of torn bread, a silver tray stacked with slabs of sulguni cheese, six large tomatoes, four cucumbers, and half of a large brown cake. On the side was a small glass of black tea. "Your tea," she said. It was enough provisions for an overland caravan to Uzbekistan.

When my marshrutka hit the westbound highway, a while later, a Nokia chimed.

"Hi, Vika!" I answered.

"GEEEEEEEEOOON! How did you know it is me, Vika?"

"Because you're the only person who has this number. I don't even know this number. It's your phone."

"Yes, yes, don't mention it! Listen, how are you?"

"I'm good, Vika. Thanks. I'm fine. How are you?"

"Oh, good, don't mention it. My husband, he drop you off at marshrutka station? Yes, okay good. You go to Zugdidi, yes? Okay, good. You call me when you get Zugdidi, tell me you are there."

"Okay, Vika. Thanks. I will."

It made somewhat more sense, now, that everybody in this country seemed to be on their phones all the time. The entire population of Georgia is continuously haranguing their guests with increasingly demanding largesse. It was perhaps the world's most exhausting place to be a guest. You had to be extremely sound of mind and body to meet the hosts here on their own terms. I gave some thought to turning off my phone to get some

sleep, but I was afraid Vika would be angry at me if she couldn't reach me to ask if I needed anything.

In Zugdidi I met up with Marika, who'd found this second wedding for me. She's a bottle blonde in a spandex sheath and she runs a hostel that mostly caters to Russian adventure tourists she dislikes for their fussiness and national condescension. The only delays en route to my bed were quick samples of her homemade spicy-plum marmalade and their regionally famous pepper-tomato spread and of course the celebrated Mingrelian mint-stuffed cheese.

It is the Japanese habit to apologize when giving a gift. They feel as though they have to acknowledge what a burden it can be to receive one. But in Japan the culture of generosity seems predicated on national isolation: one trapped insider's gift to another trapped insider invites an infinite compensatory regress of thoughtful gestures. In Georgia, the commitment to extremes of charity seems to have arisen in the context of almost a thousand years of near-constant invasions by neighbors with imperial ambitions. But Georgians are naturally gregarious and warm, and they get tired of all the martial posturing that's fallen to them. This must be why they like guests so much, why they consider them gifts from God. A guest is the kind of foreigner who isn't out to attack you.

Still, he might change his mind. He ought to be incapacitated while the host has the chance.

Upon arriving at the social hall, Marika went about getting us invited to the wedding, which was accomplished easily enough. Then she realized she'd gotten us invited to the wrong wedding. The wedding she'd meant

to crash was across the street, in a different yet identical social hall. She had to slink back and apologize for turning down the invitation she'd cadged only moments before.

The guests at the right wedding were awaiting the arrival of the newlyweds, who finally emerged from a long white limo at the head of a procession of honking Ladas. Fireworks were set off in the vacant lot between the social hall and a half-abandoned Soviet-era tower block. They proceeded down a red carpet under a series of white plastic trellises, stopping to accept a set of Chinese lanterns, which, when plump, were released directly into the balcony overhead. One of them went down like a little Hindenburg but the other was celebrated with Roman candles as it righted itself and sailed out over the Black Sea.

The food on the table was basically the same, to start with, as at the first wedding, though it was clear that we were no longer at a banquet in the distant capital. Even thinking of describing this food now, some months later, makes me feel ill, but I know Marika would be disappointed if I didn't at least mention the local specialties: the minted feta, the brown munitions of cornmeal, cold fried quails served atop their own hard-boiled eggs, garnished with pine boughs. The singer introduced the tamada, a cousin of the groom's father, who was seated on the far side of the room. As he stood up to make his introductory remarks, somebody went over to whisper something to him, and he interrupted himself with news. Marika said, "He said he heard there is an American writer and an Uruguayan photographer here, and guests are gifts from God, and perhaps the American would like to serve as assistant tamada for the evening." At Marika's urging,

though I clearly knew this drill by then, I stood and raised my glass to the tamada across the room.

The assistant tamada is expected to follow up on the tamada's serial toasts with respective toasts of his own; they can be extensions, embellishments, or ripostes—playful competition for the tamada. As one person explained it to me, the idea is that the more entertaining you can be as toastmaster, the more spellbound your audience, the longer you're encouraged by collective attention to continue, and thus the better you can put off, if for only a few minutes, the chronic inevitability of each successive glass. The tamada is supposed to have a special sensitivity to the mood of the room. He should engage the distracted, distract the engaged, slow down the drunken, and speed up the sober.

"Oh," Marika continued, "and tamada says his grandson is at that table"—a sixteen-year-old with a shaved head and a toothy smile waved at us from behind some liquor bottles he'd already been lovingly fingering—"and that he's in charge of making sure your glass is always full, and then always empty. Full when it should be full, empty when it should be empty."

The first toast: to Georgia, may it be long-lived and powerful. Marika raced to keep up with the toasts. She didn't have Ia's familial duties, so she could throw herself into the translation project with abandon; she also had a particular sensitivity to the nuances of language. Georgia invented wine, seven thousand years ago. Georgians are courageous and gracious. They like to laugh and have a good time. They have always been kind and tolerant to the minorities in their midst, all of whom are children under God. He finished and Marika elbowed me. I lifted my glass



and, in what felt to me like a clear, strong voice, called out across the room, “To the great and powerful and generous nation of Georgia!”

Tamada and I extended our glasses to each other across the crowded, tinselled banquet hall. “*Gaumarjos!*” I said. The grandson held my eye as we took our glasses in a single draught.

The second toast was to peace. Food I am no longer able to describe fell in sheets around us, like unso-  
lited manna. The restaurant singer sang a love song to the Uruguayan, in something he alleged was Italian.

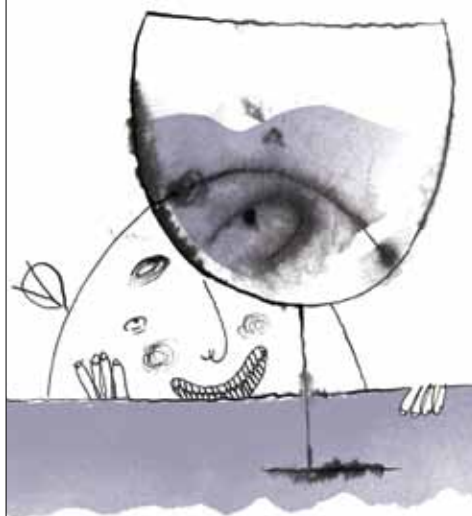
“How’s this tamada?” I asked Marika. She’d told me she was a traditionalist about these things. The most appreciated women in Tbilisi might’ve been too hard on the previous tamada, but at least they’d given me some sense of what constituted a good one—one that didn’t just drone on with a laundry list of the great drinkers he’d known—and I was keen to pay more attention tonight, to allow myself to be moved to participation in a way I hadn’t been the night before.

“It’s a little too early to tell.” The first few toasts, before the tamada and the crowd had come loose from their moorings, were pretty pro forma. “But I like him. He seems like a very old-fashioned tamada. He has a good sense of humor, and he says the things about the past that we need to know for the future.” I asked what she meant, but she shushed me as the tamada started to speak.

The third toast was to the Patriarch of the Georgian church, Ilia II. The men hastened to stand. Marika began to tear up as she either translated or extemporized her own toast. “The Patriarch is the only person who hasn’t betrayed us. All of our politicians, they lie to us and betray us. The Russians lie to us and

make war against us. The Armenians, with their rocky patch of unfertile country, lie to us and try to fuck us. Nobody is someone the Georgian people can rely on except the Patriarch, and when he dies I do not know how I will be consoled. He preaches such wisdom in troubled times. He helped us turn away from aggression and from violence and toward peace. He is the only person the Georgian people trust with all of our hearts.”

I stood to say a few short things about the patriarch, whom until that day I hadn’t heard of, and came under a brutal shoulder-thump



assault by a cadre of well-wishers. Marika nodded that I’d done an honorable job. The tamada’s grandson looked over my way and pricked his chin; this is the universal Georgian invitation to join him for a slug of chacha. Marika considered it on my behalf. “On one hand, mixing that chacha with wine is probably not a good idea. Especially when soon you will drink from horn. On other hand, you cannot say no. He is tamada’s grandson.” We linked arms and threw back the shots.

The next toast was to the bride and groom—may they be happy and healthy and have a lot of

children. Before I drank I turned to Marika. “I’ve got a question. There’s supposed to be such a big difference between various tamadas, and it’s a skill that people are known far and wide for possessing. You speak excellent, evocative, poetic English, but the way you translate these toasts—with the exception of the one to the patriarch—they sound pretty generic. Is something being lost in translation?”

“It’s the nuance, which maybe just can’t be conveyed in English, or it’s the little scraps of poetic allusions. For example, in the last toast, there was a short part of a line from Rustaveli, and it’s something all Georgians know by heart.” She reeled off a tripping, rhyming couplet from *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*, the national epic of Georgia’s golden age.

Before she could continue, the tamada was on his feet and out of a torrent of stern Georgian I picked out something that sounded suspiciously like my own name. There was some commotion. Apparently he’d caught me raising my glass only to put it down undrained. He’d missed that I’d enjoyed a shot of chacha with his grandson instead. He was piqued that his authority had gone challenged by this supposed gift of God.

A man materialized beside me with a horn. Marika put in a vote to go easy on me, but it went pointedly ignored, and the horn-chalice was filled until wine splashed out onto the pile of plates below. I bankrupted it as required, flecking the final droplets out onto the head of the grandson who’d gotten me into trouble. The tamada stood and pronounced me redeemed. From this point forward, I would be welcomed as a true Georgian. “On one hand, nice,” Marika commented. “On other hand, uh oh for you.” I felt a swell

of pride to know my participation had been sensed and sealed, and an attendant swell of terror.

For the next three toasts—to the witnesses, the parents, and the grandparents—I was very careful about making eye contact with the tamada, and each time I protected my newly bestowed clan membership by letting him watch the wine disappear. Even Marika's translations gained a new luster. It was true; this old man was a fount of wisdom and grace, regardless of the particular words he was using. I could feel the kindness we felt for each other across the room. Or maybe Marika and I were just feeling toast-softened, swept up and close in the raising high of the horns amidst the reassuring tamada patter. Women weren't expected to drink at these things the way men were, but she'd been so summoned by the toast to the patriarch that she'd allowed herself more wine than was her usual custom. She told me about her young son, and what it was like to start a business there, and her memories of the war in 1992, and her fear of Russia's power, and how much she'd hated these weddings as a child but how much she loved them as an adult.

Around midnight, Marika said, "It's important to go pay our respects to the bride and groom." Neither the Uruguayan nor I had a whole lot of coherence going for us by that point, but she held us aside until we could properly pronounce the string of chipped consonants that meant "Congratulations." The bawdy atmosphere quieted as the three of us approached the dance floor before the raised dais. The newlyweds couldn't have been older than twenty, both of them rosy and taut

and, now that I could see them close up, extremely attractive. We stood before them like supplicants before prom royalty, and I may have bowed a little, and the Uruguayan and I pronounced the unpronounceable Georgian words, and they smiled and thanked us and, before we walked away, they told Marika to tell us that it had truly been a special honor to have us there with them, in Zug-didi, to celebrate this wedding day that they would always remember, and that I should provide my own



brother a chance to give a wedding toast—because, as they reminded me, I wasn't so young. Marika looked a little teary as she ushered us out. "I know," she said to me, "that you didn't say much for those toasts, but you said them with just the right drunken enthusiasm, and I can tell you that meant a lot to those people."

**T**he story goes that the supra developed as a religious tradition at a monastic academy in Telavi in the mountains north of Tbilisi. Telavi was known throughout the

Byzantine world as a philosophical center, and the toasts were expected to resemble the progression of toasts in the Symposium. At a winery in Signaghi, on a hill above the vineyards of eastern Georgia, a tourist guide named David explained to me and a few friends that the supra is both a tradition of enjoying time and a way to make drinking pleasant: "We say that chacha is the shortcut to happiness."

Signaghi was rebricked and retiled and whitewashed in 2007, as part of a World Bank initiative to develop tourism in Georgia's wine country. The effort was made in large part in response to Russia's 2006 ban on imported Georgian wines, a retaliation for a network of natural-gas and light-crude pipelines that circumvented Russia. The Russian ban cost the young industry, one of Georgia's only promising sectors, something like \$20 million a year. There were those who said that flashy initiatives like the rehabilitation of Signaghi were nothing but cheap vanity projects. But David didn't agree. Things were looking up, he said, and now there were guests like us; he could run a business explaining the customs of his country to curious visitors.

He drove us along the restored ramparts of the town wall to his one-for-one last supra, something he does for tourists. I was a little supra'd out at that point—there'd actually been another one, high up in the remote valley of Svaneti with a large table of adventure-sports Russians, where I'm pretty sure I ended up toasting to a Georgia peacefully reunited with the so-called breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—but my friends had just arrived, and



they didn't want to miss out on the tradition of which I'd somehow become a connoisseur. I was glad I wouldn't have to face another authentic one, though; I was afraid it would kill me. I had managed to measure up once to the proper Georgian standard for a grateful guest, but for now I was happy to be treated like another milquetoast foreigner. Plus it wasn't going to be a wedding, so I didn't have to feel the weight of the expectations of a new life. He led us down through his living room and into a large basement, where twenty-five tourists had just fallen upon the usual elaborate spread. "Here present we have"—and he waved his hand around the room—"guests from all over the world." There was conversation in Hebrew and in French and in Polish and at least two languages I didn't immediately recognize. The tables, like all of this small, wonderful nation's long-suffering tables, wept quietly under the burden of its people's offerings.

David got up to make a toast but nobody noticed; everybody kept talking in the profusion of tongues. Someone at our table started to knife-clink a glass, as was our custom, but David asked her to stop. They don't usually call for attention so baldly. He waited and after a moment the room drew naturally quiet. "I will make the first toast tonight to the parents. The parents are how we are the here. The parents are the why we are the here. We will never get them to the back. They will make the much more, but no! Come the time maybe we have the sons and we have the daughters, we will make to our own kids, maybe they will make to our kids. So I toast to the fathers and the mothers and the kids."

There were cheers and cries of *Gaumarjos!* and all of the tourists emptied the wine in their raised glasses.

David took his seat. "I do reduced version of the tradition, maybe only three or four toasts, to give the idea to you, and I do it in English language, which is hard for me, but I try. Tourists don't know the tradition, but it is warm and nice to do this with the tourists, so I go in the going step by step."

After a few minutes he stood and once again waited for the talk to subside. It took the Israelis the longest. "Now is the time to toast



to everybody, people very nice and very good. We choose our work people, we choose our friend people, but this toast is to the peoples we are not choose, we are not choose in our hearts and minds, people we don't and can't choose. To our brothers and sisters, better than our friends and our neighbors. We are in the same blood. From here are in the coming, if they are in the happy and if they are in the rich, then we and I are also in the happy and also in the rich. To cook for them and to help them, some

chance to give them and we will give them. *Gaumarjos!*"

There was something helplessly and hypnotically moving about David's delivery. It didn't deviate much in content from the other translated toasts I'd heard, but there was something about the simple elegance of his words and the looping cadences of his occulted English that touched us all.

Sometime later he offered his last toast, though everybody had been happily drinking and flirting in the interim. Everybody was silent the moment he stood. "This toast is to the countries and the peace. Here tonight we are Georgians, we are USA and Lithuanians, and Polish people and Israel people and Russia and Belgium. I want to toast to freedom between the countries and peace between the countries, love to the neighbors and the friends, between two people and between two countries, between to everybody and all the countries of the world. The people are in the like to come to Georgia, and Georgia is in the like to have the peoples. All of us to have the like to be in the touch. We are all in the like and in the touch. All of the people in the toast are in the very touch. *Gaumarjos!*"

We all felt deeply in the touch, and everybody couldn't help but smile and laugh as we brought our glasses to touch for the final time. The Nokia in my pocket started to buzz, which I took as Vika's distant communion with the spirit that held us there. I'd call her back when David was finished. My friend Maria wiped her lips and turned to David. "We are all so moved. Each toast you make only gets better and better. The words are so simple but the emotion is so strong."

David smiled. "Because," he said, "alcohol." **LP**