

In the Name of Georgia

by Lasha Bugadze

Basel. 1995.

–“ You can get undressed”, my father said to me before I lay down on the extendable armchair covered with a sheet. “You’ll get hot in the night.”

I looked at him sceptically. It was only respect that made me disregard deep-rooted experience and, against my will, take off the thin blue leggings I had been wearing underneath my trousers.

I had arrived from a country which had been bitterly cold for the previous three years. Houses had been frozen without light and gas. I had had to cocoon myself beneath duvets and blankets not daring to move for fear of losing the warmth enveloping my body.

It was clear to me, on this very first night arriving in Basel, that I must revive forgotten habits. I must have appeared hesitant, as my father became more insistent:

– “You’re not in Georgia anymore. Take off your clothes!”

But, in my mind, I was still in Georgia. Perhaps in my body, too. In just one and a half days we had crossed the Black Sea, half of Europe, and, in essence, all of civilisation, first by plane (I hadn’t even remembered what a plane was), and then by train (which I could recall).

Slowly, old habits had to be reacquired.

I could wash myself completely – not just bit by bit: surrender my forehead and closed eyes and drenched face to the strong torrent of the shower. It sprayed water that was hot not lukewarm – reminding me that the element, fire, still existed. In the place I had come from and where I had been living until now, the water supply had been reduced to a sad, feeble trickle for over three months. Water had died.

Here, by contrast, collecting and heating water was no longer required. Nor was it necessary to wash body-part by body-part; trying to put your broken body back together, only feeling life where the warm water touched you. “Warmth revives you, and your blood starts to move again”. While they were giving their useless lessons, didn’t our teachers of physics, chemistry – and perhaps Georgian language and literature, too – remind us nostalgically of filtered water and clean air, about the

life-giving fire that rose from the gas stove, and about the *hard-pressed earth*? That school of mine badly needed repairs in December 1991 but by January 1992 would clearly never be repaired again.

It wasn't just lost sensations that were beginning to come back but signs of life. I could see buses that had disappeared along with the trolleybus at the end of 1992; the extinguished reds, greens and yellows of the traffic lights shone once more; and light flooded from windows and shops, ten even a hundred times more than in my own country, and which gave me, looking from the other side of the glass, not a view of things I wanted to possess but a glimpse of my own illuminated reflection. New smells came and went: bread or cake, coffee or sweet-exotic teas. Smells that did not just belong to the food and the drinks but were part of the very air. You could taste it. The air had a taste. A smell you could taste.

Until then, there had only been the smell of kerosene, oil-lamps and ash. They had completely masked my body's natural odour. After a couple of weeks, my father revealed that when he first hugged me I exuded a disagreeable burnt smell as if I had risen from the ashes. This was not for lack of washing. There was nothing on my body that could have caused such an unpleasant smell. But in the one and a half days of travel, and the three or so days since our arrival, my own smell and memory – lost since 1992 – had returned, like the rose of civilisation returning to a pale face ...

Perhaps it was the pleasurable feel of the hot water, or because I was far from home, but words began to come back to me now; words which could have come at any other time but which, here, had nothing trivial about them and expressed a wholly novel feeling. It was as if I had been born again.

1977

Before Birth: With whom? Where?

This man – in truth more boy than man – has sideburns that almost touch his cheeks. His hair, which because of lack of time, or stubbornness or ideology, has not been cut. It resembles a lion's mane. It's as if another whole head sits above his own head, like a halo. He wears wide-bottomed trousers from which spring the tips of his grey shoes, and he is standing by the plane tree at *Lagidze's waters* waiting for a red-faced, chubby man, who is bent and hunched over the water fountain, to move aside and make space for him. I want this young person for myself. I like him. Perhaps I already love him – as it *feels* like I have met him before and trust him. I need this man, and he is ready to be mine. He must share what he has with me.

As it is, his turn comes (mine, if everything goes right and nothing threatens my plans, will be next year). The red-faced man moves away from the water fountain and the puckered lips of my “chosen one” touch the trickle of running water.

Drink water, my dear. Quench your thirst. Relax and eat but moderately as I don't want you to tire yourself or lack energy, but be healthy, mobile and as full of life for as long as you can. I have chosen this witty one for myself. An intellectual, endowed with impressive oratorical skills. An entertainer, who on occasion can be over-bearingly affectionate. A thinker who will walk with you all day long and who does things from respect not duty. A man who treats his juniors by years as equals and who'll also pick you up and sit you on his shoulders. In essence, a man who has grown up with someone twenty years younger than himself.

Let's not lie to ourselves. We can't avoid conflict because it is difficult to live without conflict when one person is older and the other younger. We'll have to get used to it, as it will be difficult to live under one roof. Two is quite a crowd and we take up a lot of space (the twenty year age-gap itself never decrease, but I won't always be twenty years younger than him). We'll get angry with each other but it will be fleeting and brief, just small explosions. But he won't always be as old compared to me.

It goes without saying that from here he looks quite lovely *with his flowing mane* (he'll never give up his long hair – it is his statement), and his slim body and tattered grey coat (the one he'll be wearing tomorrow when that precious photo is taken when, unable to board his plane because of heavy cloud cover, he stands, gloomy, next to a university-mate (also stranded), who sports a striking, fiery beard). Slung over his shoulder is a weathered leather bag. It's as *classic* as possible in order to hide his own empty pockets.

This much I know. Humankind is divided between the poor, the partly-poor and the wealthy. But nobody minds his poverty because he enjoys the confidence and goodwill of the Art Academy's *Faculty of Fine Arts*. He thrusts the rolled-up plans for the restoration of Shio-Mgvime monastery into his bag. It's place he has often walked recently. If everything works out as I have planned, tomorrow he'll be looking at the one I call my second choice. This won't be their first meeting but it will be important nevertheless. However, the place where they'll meet will be a little strange: a well which is apparently a saint's grave. What concerns me is not the grave itself so much as the emotion created between them: a mutual sympathy, a passion tinged with sadness, the desire caught in a furtive stare – in other words, everything that should become love.

I hope she will not speak too much or too tediously in trying to make an impression, because he'll want a clever conversation partner rather than a prattler. But that's for tomorrow or the next day. For now he's drinking, dampening his moustache and taking care not to get water on the papers protruding from his bag, which is getting in the way. He likes that there is something disorderly about his appearance, that his bag hangs uncomfortably. He doesn't care that his hair could get wet if he doesn't put it behind his ears (those superfluous locks the government has banned by law) because he wears his long hair with pride. For him, this sloppiness (as his rector and the ruling party would put it) is no superficial external feature. This is dangerous territory, but for this young man it's more *amusing* than dangerous.

Like when the quiet, harmless civil servant (the millionth member of this country's only ruling party), and the father of my second choice, struggling to find a topic of conversation to share with his new son-in-law, asked: "Do you study in the academy?" "Yes". "Will you draw Lenin?" "I haven't tried, I don't know."

As a matter of principle, he won't paint him. I like this conversation, this misunderstanding, this warm flippancy between the two men. Men whose facial characteristics and moods I am to inherit (a face from the elder, and a temperament from the younger). He despises the person, the name, he hasn't painted. I feel his hatred. I am coming to help him because I know he must live with this hatred and that, in contrast to the obedient civil servant, loathing and resentment must become his job.

He will tell me, fifteen years later, that he is disappointed with everything and wants to leave with his moustache slightly shorter, and his hair, noticeably so. He is still young but also still, as always, 20 years older than me. I like those keen eyes, high-forehead, hooked nose and long fingers blackened by charcoal.

I would wish that man to be my father.

The Second Chosen One

The re stands the box that bears an unpleasant name –television –showing women with colourful leggings clinging tight to their body and exercising to the beat of rhythmic music. Another woman stands in front of the box, copying their movements. In my opinion this woman is much more beautiful and, quite simply, more *like me* than the women on the television. She is slightly heavier than them, just a few kilos heavier, and which, presumably, will soon be shed with all that exertion. They move mechanically while this woman moves with all her heart and all her belief in the future, with a daring rooted in her biography and history, and because she is certain that nothing will stop her now she's been roused into action.

I wonder who convinced her – or why – that watching TV exercise routines and jogging could help her lose weight? Or why it seems to her that she is more overweight than she really is. That she can have distorted notions about herself, about me, or others... is this becoming a trait? Or is it just in her character to exaggerate? I wonder what she doesn't like about herself, when everyone else loves her from the outside. Me, for instance, I fell in love with a simple look – though I know it's much more important that she too falls in love, for without this the fruits of my admiration would be short-lived. She has a distorted sense of self. People love her but she thinks their love is fading. She worries that she is imperfect (she once said to her mother; you should've given birth to me in a place where I would've either have been beautiful according to an accepted standard, or ugly by common consent, because when, as hard as you try, you don't know *which of them you are*, it is the most terrible of things). She likes to dramatise.

Fifteen years before this dance she decided to cry, for a whole night, to obtain a dress she had seen in an American film cut and misshapen by the censors (if only the censor had cut the dress rather than the film). Yet there was nothing her mother could say to convince her that, in truth, neither the dress nor America really existed, at least not for the part of the world where they, and now I, had chosen to live. But *this place* is changing, picking up its feet and dancing to the rhythm of these women in a way that would have been unthinkable back then when she begged her mother to buy her that non-existent dress. It turned out they *did* exist – the dress, too, (though she doesn't need it anymore). She delights in her connection with these women; women she believes are eternal. She is happy being part of this exercise movement which turns her life into *America*. The Sport Palace in Tbilisi, the "26 commissar" metro station, the TV mast on the funicular, her neighbours' clothes, her generally decent father, her mother – quiet though sometimes strangely agitated when having a nightmare – and husbands, old and new. Stubborn, ambitious, hopeful males who believed *everything will be fine*.

She is happy in this hope, because she's still young; nothing has begun. She's still only nineteen years older than me. Her best years may have *begun* but she didn't know that the next ten years, the best years of her youth, would disappear before they'd even started. She didn't know that this country would eat up those years (and maybe even more), and she would suddenly discover that, though *recently* young, something had happened, not within her but around her, and that all of a sudden she was *ten years older*, however young she felt inside. Frightened and silent, like so many of those women in their twenties and thirties who would come to discover that their best years were consumed by their husbands or their country.

Because, if the country did not take her as a spouse, men did. Men who promised (or at least seemed to promise) that she would not pass a single year without being happy. With good reason, she was angry at these men, and these countries, that had failed and broken her trust. Men, whose intelligence she easily surpassed, had somehow persuaded her to embrace menial, unchallenging roles and had, in this or that guise, persuaded her that her concerns weren't really important and that her life was the responsibility of this man or that husband. Men who persuaded her that it wasn't worth worrying about such things because she was destined to have children (ensured by me), and that so long as she was a thoughtful, likeable, flower-like wife who defended and offered emotional support to her man (even if overly affectionate at times), nothing more was required.

She still quarreled, cried at the slightest provocation, and ate crayons during her pregnancy to compensate for her lack of calcium; but always without a doubt that the other, the man, would *sort out* her life. Later, the lie was discovered and trust was destroyed in both her work and her husbands. But in the end the greatest disappointment would turn out to be the country itself. The country, and the dreams and ambitions that propelled her to jump and spin to the exercise-instructions of those American women, had demanded unconditional love, like a husband. Yet sadly, she had nothing to love – at least in *those best years*, when this country's youth shouldn't have had their opportunities for happiness destroyed.

I like her character. I like how *natural and authentic* she is. Because of this and out of love, I want this creature, nineteen years my senior and tired of waiting for a better life, to be my mother.

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